

Article

John Muir and “Godful” Nature

Raymond Barnett

Department of Biology, California State University, Chico, CA 95928, USA;

E-Mail: rjbarnett@sbcglobal.net

Received: 12 March 2012; in revised form: 1 April 2012 / Accepted: 6 April 2012 /

Published: 13 April 2012

Abstract: John Muir, America’s most influential conservationist, held a special view of Nature, one that treated Nature as “Godful” and “unredeemed” because, unlike humankind, Nature has not “fallen”. It is a view that asks us to adopt a gaiacentric, not anthropocentric, perspective on our place in the universe. This article explores the meaning and development of that view and how it came to define Muir’s faith and serve his noble purpose of preserving the Wilderness.

Keywords: nature; natural world; wilderness; Godful; gaiacentric; Taoist

John Muir’s Mark

When California was asked to design a quarter in the States series, the state of movie star governors and celebrities, the cutting-edge state with an economy larger than all but seven countries in the world, responded with a bearded man in rumpled clothing, staff in his gnarled hand, staring up at a massive chunk of granite. How strange. But the man is John Muir and the massive chunk of granite is the magnificent Half Dome in Yosemite Valley. Such is the power of this 19th century spiritual exemplar for the preservation of Nature in this most modern of states that hardly any controversy attended the selection.

Muir, named the father of America’s surging conservation movement by Time magazine in 1965, was the National Wildlife Federation’s second inductee into the Conservation Hall of Fame (after Theodore Roosevelt). He founded the Sierra Club in 1892, serving as its President until his death in 1914, and played an important role in the battles with livestock, timber, and mining interests to save from destruction the glories of an enlarged Yosemite National Park, Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks in California, Glacier National Park in Montana, the White River Forest Preserve in Colorado, Mt. Rainer National Park in Washington state, and the Grand Canyon National Monument,

as well as providing personal guided tours of Yosemite to President Teddy Roosevelt (who ended up camping three nights with Muir there, waking up one morning covered by snow) and then President William Howard Taft.

When I stood in a chilling wind at 14,495 feet atop Mt. Whitney on a bright August morning three years ago, a 63-year-old man wheezing the thin air into his lungs, I turned my gaze to the tallest of the surrounding peaks, only a mile to the south and 480 feet lower: Mt. Muir. My two living daughters have both backpacked the John Muir Trail, 212 miles through arguably the loveliest coniferous forests and high country in the world, including the huge John Muir Wilderness Area. On that trail they crossed over Muir Pass, just south of which sits Helen Lake, named for Muir's younger daughter. Many a happy day have I spent in Muir Woods on Mt. Tamalpais just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, one of thousands from around the world glorying in the coastal redwoods marching up the hills from Redwood Creek. In Alaska, there is the huge Muir's Glacier in the great bay that Muir named Glacier Bay, as well as Muir Inlet, Muir Point, and another Mt. Muir. The great Harvard botanist, Darwin confidant, and Muir friend Asa Gray bestowed the scientific name *Erigeron muirii* on an Arctic plant in the compositae discovered by Muir in Alaska, and named the newly described Granite mousetail plant *Ivesia muirii*, in part because like Muir, the modest rose is found in the High Sierra and flourishes on rocky slopes and cliffs. And in Washington State the Muir Snowfield nestles between two glaciers just southeast of the crest of Mt. Rainier.

Muir, arguably the most skillful and moving natural history writer in the late 19th century, moved a hard-boiled New York editor of *Atlantic Monthly* to exclaim after reading one of his essays: "I felt almost as if I had found religion!" ([1], p. 328) Indeed, something akin to a cult surrounds Muir amongst those who frequent the glacier-bound bays of Alaska and the high country of the Sierra Nevada. His name is evoked around campfires as stars are being admired and exploits recounted, whether by park rangers, grizzled backpackers, or eager young boys and girls on their first trip into the back country. I have often heard Muir mentioned with spiritual awe by climbers and outdoors men and women in my company. At a recent winter solstice celebration a friend of mine described to me his recent ascent of the rugged boulder-strewn Tenaya Canyon above Yosemite Valley, reminding me with gleaming eyes that Muir was the first white man to accomplish the brutal six mile scramble (six miles as the raven flies; treble that as the human goes). With relish my friend recounted that it was one of the very few places where Muir's seemingly supernatural mountaineering savvy had failed him, leading to a serious fall that ended with the unconscious Muir tangled in spirea and scrub oak less than a yard from a further precipitous thousand-foot drop into surging Tenaya Creek below.

Why? Why would the state of Silicon Valley and movie celebrities turn to a man who described himself as "a tramp" for their State Quarter? Why would a man's name festoon the peaks and passes of an entire mountain range and the glaciers and inlets of the far north? This man, slight of build, oblivious to his clothes and beard, forever wandering among wild places—what is it about this man John Muir that has led to his being regarded as a spiritual exemplar of caring for the natural world? To answer this question, I will first describe his intense immersion in the natural world on his epic wilderness rambles, then the ecstatic love for nature that arose from these journeys. His active, trail-blazing commitment to protecting the natural world from the ravages of commercial interests follows. I will discuss his journey from anthropocentrism to what must be called gaiacentrism, and his stern, prophetic indictment of "Lord Man" and man's treatment of the natural world. Finally, I step

back and examine how, strangely enough, it is with the mountain-wandering Taoists of traditional China that Muir would surely have felt most comfortable.

Muir in the Natural World

If ever a man was born to wander, it was John Muir. And wander he did, in a long series of epic journeys that boggle our modern minds. I can only highlight some of the more famous “saunters,” as Muir would invariably describe them, in the order in which they transpired. This summary is pertinent, critical even, to understanding both the awe in which Muir is held by today’s environmentalists, as well as forming the basis for Muir’s view of the natural world.

A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf. While repairing a drive belt in one of the country’s largest wheel-making shops, at which his ingenuity and industriousness had earned him the offer of a partnership, the pointed shaft of a file was driven into Muir’s right eye. While recuperating in a darkened room for several weeks, Muir decided that life (and his eyesight) was too short to spend in a machine shop. “I bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God,” by which he meant the natural world. ([2], p. 155) With a plant press, a botany manual, and the barest of necessities, Muir walked across the Ohio River from Jeffersonville, Indiana in the fall of 1867 and continued walking, guided only by an aim “to push on in a general southward direction by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find.” ([2], p. 2). He slept outside more often than not, with neither tent nor blanket, and covered about 25 miles most days. Two months and a thousand miles by foot later, having collected and identified hundreds of new plants through Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, he had reached the Gulf of Mexico and was flat on his back, delirious, for nearly a month, brought down by malaria. Unable to find a ship to take him to South America to explore the Amazon, he settled instead for a boat to California. Looking back on the decision to leave the machine shop and his rapid promotions there, Muir commented “I could have become a millionaire; instead I became a tramp.” ([3], p. 45).

My First Summer in the Sierras. In California Muir was offered a job in 1869 overseeing a shepherd and 2,000 sheep; he walked, at the sheep pace of about a mile an hour, from the stifling hot, dry valley up through the foothills to the lower montane and then the high coniferous forests and, finally, Tuolumne Meadows in the Sierra high country. At the various stages of the journey, while the sheep proceeded to destroy the meadows at that location, Muir took off to explore the mountains and climb nearby peaks. He ranged far and fast, now, in long idyllic days in which he covered 20 or more miles, quickly figuring out the watersheds and sources for the creeks and rivers, noticing the displaced boulders and moraines testifying to widespread glacial action, learning the trees, flowers, birds, and mammals of the various regions he traversed. By the end of the summer, as they hastened the sheep down ahead of oncoming early snows, Muir was enchanted by the distinctive beauty and diversity of the high Sierra, and determined to chart the geologic history of the region’s mountains and valleys; the arc of his life was set.

The Giant Sequoia Exploration. In the summer of 1875, having completed and arranged for the publication of several years’ worth of study establishing his controversial (and initially ridiculed) claim that Yosemite Valley and much of the Sierra was given its present form by glacial action, Muir decided to explore and catalogue the groves of Giant Sequoias scattered throughout the Sierra Nevada

range (and nowhere else in the world). “King Sequoia,” *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, the largest living creatures on the planet (in terms of volume and weight) had captured Muir’s heart, and their limited distribution had never been systematically established. On foot, as always, Muir traveled south to the famous Mariposa Grove of sequoias, then forged to the Nelder Grove some four miles further south. He discovered a discontinuity in the groves thereafter, traveling past the San Joaquin river (through what is now a portion of the John Muir Wilderness) before struggling into the trackless Kings river watershed and the heart of sequoia density: the McKinley grove first, then after the daunting one-mile descent into the rugged Kings River Canyon and up the other side, the Converse Basin, a six-mile long forest of thousands of the giant trees. (By 1918 this extensive grove had been utterly destroyed by logging.) Muir pushed south past the Kings River watershed and into the Kaweah River watershed, encountering even more and larger groves of the giant trees. The huge grove between the Marble fork and the Middle fork of the Kaweah he dubbed “Giant Forest,” a name which has lasted to the present for this grove holding three of the world’s four largest trees. Ever the student of nature, Muir spent several days studying a massive forest fire raging between the Middle and East forks of the Kaweah, then pressed south to the groves in the Tule river and Kern river watersheds, the southernmost sequoias.

At the end, Muir had walked over 200 miles through incredibly rugged terrain, navigating as always by his compass, phenomenal sense of orientation, and “feel” for the land, finding sequoias by sight from the highest points and from mountain men and Native Americans. In a report to the *San Francisco Bulletin* newspaper, later revised and published in *Harpers*, Muir located two-thirds of today’s established giant sequoia groves, and noted an average sequoia diameter of 20 feet (that’s *diameter*, not circumference!), height of 275 feet, with trees 25 feet wide and 300 feet tall not uncommon, and ones 30 feet wide occasionally encountered. Muir had put the giant sequoia on the map and on scientific footing.

1877. Even by Muir standards, the fall of 1877 was filled with outdoor adventures. In September the 39-year-old Muir guided Harvard botanist Asa Gray and the great English botanist Sir Joseph Hooker (both of them confidants and champions of Charles Darwin) on a botanizing outing on Mount Shasta with General John Bidwell of Chico. Muir then floated 195 river miles down the Sacramento River from near Chico to Sacramento by himself, using a boat thrown together by Bidwell’s carpenter. He promptly caught a train to Visalia on the western shoulder of the Sierra, and thence by foot to the infamous gorge on the upper reaches of the Middle fork of the Kings river, which had the reputation of being too difficult to traverse. (The same claim had been made about Tenaya canyon above Yosemite Valley, and Muir had laid that claim to rest several years earlier.) Down the canyon he walked, crawled, jumped, dropped, slid, and often swam, emerging at the bottom of the gorge some twelve days later, having gone the last four days with no food, but showing that, indeed, the gorge was accessible—to John Muir, at least. After a meal, he took train and stagecoach north to the Merced River at Hopeton (to which it flows out of Yosemite Valley), constructed with his own hands a very crude boat from twisted fence boards, and launched himself upon the Merced for another float trip. Two hundred and fifty miles and two weeks later, having reached the San Joaquin river and rowed past Stockton into the Delta (“the tule region,” he called it) and through its length to the junction of Suisin Bay and San Francisco Bay, he finally docked his boat at the orchards of Dr. John Strentzel at Martinez. After two days replenishing his gaunt frame and ragged clothes there (Dr. Strentzel’s daughter Louie would become Muir’s wife three years later), he nonchalantly walked the twenty miles

to Oakland, boarded the ferry to San Francisco, and took a breather to work on his writing and public lectures.

Alaska Travels. Determined to study living glaciers whose ancient forebears he had established as the shapers of Yosemite Valley and the Sierra Nevada, Muir first traveled to Alaska in 1879, only twelve years after its purchase from Russia. He would take five trips to the frozen land, two of them as an invited scientist on expeditions mounted by the U.S. government (1881, on the U.S. revenue cutter *Thomas Corwin*) or wealthy individuals (1899, the Harriman Expedition). On his first trip, he traveled 800 miles along the coast in large canoes manned by hired Indians, and discovered Glacier Bay and its largest glacier, later named Muir Glacier in his honor. The next year he was back, and explored Glacier Bay and also Taylor Bay and its Brady Glacier. Awakening one morning in a driving rainstorm beside that glacier, he put aside his overcoat “knowing I would be drenched anyhow, and firmly tied my mountain shoes, tightened my belt, shouldered my ice-axe, and thus free and ready for rough work, pushed on, regardless as possible of mere rain.” ([4], p. 248) He was accompanied by Stickeen, a camp dog he could not shoo away. Muir and Stickeen followed the wracked forest at the edge of the glacier for four miles, then using his ice-axe Muir hacked footholds into the ice and mounted onto the glacier itself. Finding relatively few and narrow crevasses in this portion, Muir set off in the continuing storm to chart the far side of the glacier, some seven miles away, taking frequent compass readings to facilitate his return. Towards five o’clock he and Stickeen set off to retrace the glacier and reach camp by dark:

“After two hours of hard work I came to a maze of crevasses of appalling depth and width which could not be passed apparently either up or down. I traced them with firm nerve developed by the danger, making wide jumps, poising cautiously on dizzy edges after cutting footholds, taking wide crevasses at a grand leap at once frightful and inspiring.” ([4], pp. 251–252).

As dusk gathered Muir was frequently running between crevasses to make better time, snow now beginning to fall as the temperature plunged. He made the mistake of jumping one wide crevasse to a lower level on the far side, thus cutting off return by that route. He pushed on, to discover to his dismay “the very widest of all the longitudinal crevasses we had yet encountered. It was about forty feet wide.” Reconnoitering up and down the crevasse, he spotted a feature that presented his only hope of survival: a sliver-thin bridge of ice that spanned the crevasse at a point where it was seventy five feet wide, seemingly bottomless depths yawning blue-black below the bridge to either side. The prospect daunted even Muir; it seemed impossible to contemplate.

“...venturing ahead across the giant crevasse by the very worst of the sliver (ice) bridges I had ever seen. It was so badly weathered and melted down that it formed a knife-edge, and extended across from side to side in a low, drooping curve like that made by a loose rope attached at each end at the same height. But the worst difficulty was that the ends of the down-curving sliver were attached to the sides at a depth of about eight or ten feet below the surface of the glacier. Getting down to the edge of the bridge, and then after crossing it getting up the other side, seemed hardly possible. However, I decided to dare the dangers of the fearful sliver rather than to attempt to retrace my steps. Accordingly I dug a low groove in the rounded edge for my knees to rest in and, leaning over, began to cut a narrow foothold on the steep, smooth side (with my ice-axe)...After getting down one step I cautiously stooped and cut another and another in succession until I reached the point where the sliver was attached to the

wall. There, cautiously balancing, I chipped down the upcurved end of the bridge until I had formed a small level platform about a foot wide, then, bending forward, got astride of the end of the sliver, steadied myself with my knees, then cut off (*i.e.*, shaved down) the top of the sliver, hitching myself forward an inch or two at a time, leaving it about four inches wide for Stickeen. Arrived at the farther end of the sliver, which was about seventy-five feet long, I chipped another little platform on its upcurved end, cautiously rose to my feet, and with infinite pains cut narrow notch steps and finger-holds in the wall and finally got safely (up the ten-foot wall and) across.” ([4], pp. 254–255).

And the dog Stickeen? Muir exhorted him to follow. After howling and whining anxiously on the far side for some minutes, the dog:

“...hushed his cries, slid his little feet slowly down into my footsteps (and) out on the big sliver, walked slowly and cautiously along the sliver as if holding his breath, while the snow was falling and the wind was moaning and threatening to blow him off. When he arrived at the foot of the slope below me, I was kneeling on the brink ready to assist him in case he should be unable to reach the top. He looked up along the row of notched steps I had made, as if fixing them in his mind, then with a nervous spring he whizzed up and passed me out on to the level ice, and ran and cried and barked and rolled about fairly hysterical in the sudden revulsion from the depth of despair to triumphant joy.” ([4], pp. 255–256).

In 1890 Muir returned to Alaska for his fourth visit, and took a solitary ten-day trip traversing the mammoth Muir Glacier on Glacier Bay, pushing a small sled containing his compass, journal, bread, tea bags, and a bear skin that served as sleeping bag. His joy at the scenery and adventure is recorded in ecstatic journal entries. But then his journal entry of July 19: “Nearly blind. The light is intolerable and I fear I may be long unfitted for work. I have been lying on my back all day with a snow poultice bound over my eyes. Every object I try to look at seems double...This is the first time in Alaska that I have had too much sunshine.” After several days, he regained his vision, though it was weak. He was close to the end of his return when he stepped onto a snow-covered crevasse and toppled head-first into a deep icy pool of frigid water. “Down I plunged over head and ears, but of course bobbed up again, and after a hard struggle succeeded in dragging myself out over the farther side. Then I dragged my sled over ...made haste to strip off my clothing, threw it in a sloppy heap and crept into my (bearskin) sleeping-bag to shiver away the night as best I could.” ([4], pp. 310–311).

Several days later, the indefatigable Muir was exploring iceberg-crowded Glacier Bay by kayak, again with no companions:

“After a hard, anxious struggle, I reached the mouth of the Hugh Miller fiord about sundown, and tried to find a camp-spot on its steep, boulder-bound shore. But no landing-place where it seemed possible to drag the canoe above high-tide mark was discovered after examining a mile or more of this dreary, forbidding barrier, and as night was closing down, I decided to try to grope my way across the mouth of the fiord in the starlight to an open sandy spot on which I had camped in October, 1979, a distance of about three or four miles. With the utmost caution I picked my way through the sparkling (ice) bergs, and after an hour or two of this nerve-trying work, when I was perhaps less than half-way across and dreading the loss of the frail canoe which would include the loss of myself, I came to a pack of very large bergs which loomed threateningly, offering no visible thoroughfare. Paddling and pushing to right and left, I at last discovered a sheer-walled opening about four feet wide and perhaps two hundred feet long, formed apparently by the splitting of a huge iceberg. I hesitated to enter this passage, fearing that the slightest change in the tide-current might close it,

but ventured nevertheless, judging that the dangers ahead might not be greater than those I had already passed. When I had got about a third of the way in, I suddenly discovered that the smooth-walled ice-lane was growing narrower, and with desperate haste backed out. Just as the bow of the canoe cleared the sheer walls they came together with a growling crunch. Terror-stricken, I turned back, and in an anxious hour or two gladly reached the rock-bound shore that had at first repelled me, determined to stay on guard all night in the canoe or find someplace where with the strength that comes in a fight for life I could drag it up the boulder wall beyond ice danger. This last was happily done about midnight, and with no thought of sleep I went to bed rejoicing. My bed was two boulders, and as I lay wedged and bent on their up-bulging sides, beguiling the hard, cold time in gazing into the starry sky and across the sparkling bay, magnificent upright bars of light in bright prismatic colors suddenly appeared (in the sky), marching swiftly in close succession along the northern horizon...How long these glad, eager soldiers of light held on their way I cannot tell; for sense of time was charmed out of mind and the blessed night circled away in measureless rejoicing enthusiasm.” ([4], pp. 312–314).

The wilderness adventures recounted above do not by any means exhaust the store of those that could be related for Muir, but they hopefully illustrate his astonishing vitality, toughness, strength, and intrepid immersion in the natural world. Many writers of the late nineteenth century wrote of nature and wildness—Thoreau, Emerson, Burroughs chief amongst them—but none remotely approach Muir in actual solitary experience in the wildest regions of the natural world. None routinely kissed the cheek of death in their experiences in wilderness as did Muir. Let us now turn to what this intrepid survivor of wilderness rambles saw in the natural world.

Nature as God’s Beauty and Love Manifest

Today it is not widely remembered that John Muir possessed a keen spiritual root, and that his awe of the natural world was rooted in his recognition of God as the Creator of nature. Muir was required to learn the Bible by rote by his religiously-zealous father, who punished him for mistakes in the verses by whippings; by his teens Muir could quote “by heart and by sore flesh” two-thirds of the Old Testament and all the New, and he quoted and referred to Biblical verse throughout his life. ([3], p. 9) Though his father’s near-daily whippings of Muir during his teenage years and early 20s would doubtless be classed as abuse by today’s standards, the beatings did not lessen Muir’s regard for the Holy Writ expounded by his father. Muir’s conviction that God was the Creator of the natural world and that His beauty and love shine brilliantly in His works never falters. *To Muir nature is God’s beauty and love made manifest*, and to him that is always exhilarating and supremely inspiring. But it is important to note that the emphasis is not on the God behind the Creation. Muir’s attention and devotion is always directed to the specific “Godful” plants, animals, rocks, waters, clouds, and sky *themselves*. This contrasts with his contemporary religious poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, in whose work the emphasis often seems to be more on the God behind His creation than the created work itself; the world is glorious because it illustrates the glory of the Creator. Not so for Muir, whose delight always centered in the phenomenon itself.

As late as 1890, in his fourth visit to Alaska, Muir writes in his journal that:

“Every excursion that I have made in all my rambling life has been fruitful and delightful, from the smallest indefinite saunter an hour or two in length to the noblest summer’s flight...All the wild world is beautiful, and it matters but little where we go...everywhere and always we are in God’s eternal beauty and love.” ([5], p. 299).

Even those places seemingly barren, upon closer inspection bear witness to the beauty and love of God. Describing the top of Mt. Hoffman northwest of Tenaya Lake during his first summer in the High Sierra (1869), Muir observes that:

“The surface of the ground so dull and forbidding at first sight, besides being rich in plants, shines and sparkles with crystals: mica, hornblende, feldspar, quartz, tourmaline. The radiance in some places is so great as to be fairly dazzling, keen lance rays of every color flashing, sparkling in glorious abundance, joining the plants in their fine, brave beauty-work,—every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.” ([6], p. 205).

On a trip to the San Joaquin River basin in 1873, Muir writes in his journal that:

“Linnaeus says Nature never leaps, which means that God never shouts or spouts or speaks incoherently. The rocks and sublime canyons, and waters and winds, and all life structures—animals and ouzels, meadows and groves, and all the silver stars—are words of God, and they flow smooth from his lips.” ([5], pp. 153–154).

During the Inyo earthquake of 1872, Muir ran about Yosemite Valley in a fever of excitement, shouting “A noble earthquake! A noble earthquake!” While the rocks of a new talus slope were still warm and shimmering from the collapse of a cliff to the valley’s floor, Muir ran upon them and gloried in their power. He later observes:

“If for a moment you are inclined to regard these taluses as mere draggled, chaotic dumps, climb to the top of one of them, tie your mountain shoes firmly over the instep, and with braved nerves run down without any haggling, puttering hesitation, boldly jumping from boulder to boulder with even speed. You will then find your feet playing a tune, and quickly discover the music and poetry of rock-piles—a fine lesson; and all Nature’s wildness tells the same story. Storms of every sort, torrents, earthquakes, cataclysms, “convulsions of nature,” *etc.*, however mysterious and lawless at first sight they may seem, are only harmonious notes in the song of creation, varied expressions of God’s love.” ([7], p. 169).

Because God is so potent, every “expression of God’s love” is shot through and through with His vitality. In his journals from 1873, Muir writes:

“Now all of the individual ‘things’ or ‘beings’ into which the world is wrought are sparks of the Divine Soul variously clothed upon with flesh, leaves, or that harder tissue called rock, water, *etc.*” ([5], pp. 137–138).

The natural world, then, gives us mirrors and windows into God’s beauty, every phenomenon a word from His lips, an expression of His love, a spark of His soul. Little wonder, then, that Muir is often moved to ecstatic outbursts in his wanderings. He describes the solemn energy of a storm at Lake Washburn in 1871, in the upper reaches of the Merced River above Yosemite Valley:

“Nearby a clump of tall pines at bend of lake shuts off all the distant mountain, leaving nothing but the clear, present, living, soul-awakening purity of heaven...It is as if the lake, mountain, trees had souls, formed one

soul, which had died and gone before the throne of God, the great First Soul, and by direct creative act of God had all earthly purity deepened, refined, brightness brightened, spirituality spiritualized, countenance, gesture made wholly Godful!...I spring to my feet crying ‘Heaven and earth! Rock is not light, not heavy, not transparent, not opaque, but every pore gushes, glows like a thought with immortal life!’” ([5], pp. 83–84).

Note here Muir’s conviction that spirituality inheres in plants, animals, and rocks.

Quotes from the Bible are sprinkled throughout Muir’s writings, especially his journals. The Old Testament definitely predominates, but allusions to the New are also present. In his journal from 1873 Muir writes of flowers that:

“We seem to imagine that since Herod beheaded John the Baptist, there is no longer any voice crying in the wilderness. But no one in the wilderness can possibly make such a mistake, for every one of these flowers is such a voice. No wilderness in the world is so desolate as to be without divine ministers. God’s love covers all the earth as the sky covers it, and also fills it in every pore. And this love has voices heard by all who have ears to hear.” ([5], pp. 135–136).

Noticing spring’s first flush of blooming golden flowers in the foothills upon his arrival in California in 1869, Muir:

“...left my sheep on the rim hills and went down into the Hollow to meet the lovely visitors in their robes of gold. They numbered about one million souls in five or six companies (species). I welcomed them to the world, congratulated them upon the goodness of their home, and blessed them for their beauty, leaving them a happy flock in keeping of the Great Shepherd...Perhaps I do not understand the request of Moses, ‘Show me thy glory’...King David was a better observer: ‘The whole earth is full of thy glory.’” ([5], p. 24).

Note Muir’s respectful use of scripture here, as always: he will not criticize Moses, but ventures that “perhaps I do not understand” him.

A recurring note in Muir’s celebration of God’s beauty and love made manifest in His creation is the insight that Creation is not just something that happened long ago, but is rather a phenomenon that recurs every season, indeed every day in the present. God is at work in the world still, and we are privileged to observe and celebrate and be a part of it.

“The last days of this glacial winter are not yet past; we live in ‘creation’s dawn.’ The morning stars still sing together, and the world, though made, is still being made and becoming more beautiful every day.” ([5], p. 72).

The ever-present Creation in wilderness inspires Muir to this paean bringing together Revelation and Job, New Testament and Old:

“(Wanting to linger in the Sierras) what glorious cloud-lands I should see, storms and calms,—a new heaven and a new earth every day...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 songs of God shouting for joy.’” ([6], p. 287).

Little wonder, then, that in wandering the wilderness Muir is constantly surrounded by God’s love and beauty, every day a blessing, every night a benediction. In his first summer in the Sierra, Muir

encounters a large flood-transported cubical boulder (reminding us of the Muslim's Kaaba) sitting at the foot of a waterfall in a tributary of the North Fork of the Merced River:

"One of these ancient flood boulders stands firm in the middle of the stream channel, just below the lower edge of the pool dam at the foot of the fall nearest our camp. It is a nearly cubical mass of granite about eight feet high, plushed with mosses over the top and down the sides...like an altar...The place seemed holy, where one might hope to see God. After dark, when the camp was at rest, I groped my way back to the altar boulder and passed the night on it,—above the water, beneath the leaves and stars,—everything still more impressive than by day, the fall seen dimly white, singing Nature's old love song with solemn enthusiasm, while the stars peering through the leaf-roof seemed to join the white water's song. Precious night, precious day to abide in me forever. Thanks be to God for this immortal gift." ([6], pp. 64–65).

So vividly ever-present is God in His Creation that even death and desolation are marks of His love, whether in flowers or ice-cones:

"Silky white-leaved *Eriogonum* (plants), beautiful in death, umbels of flowers on gravel in perfect beauty of color, dead. How apparent are the love and tenderness of God in the keeping of those dear, delicate plant-children of His in places we are wrongly taught to call wild, desolate, deserted! God's love covers His world like a garment of light." ([5], pp. 80–81).

"The ice-cone at the foot of the Upper (Yosemite) Fall is black in mouth, and ragged and broken like a crater...A wild play of light illumines the mouth of the cone, in the midst of the spray and water of ever-varying forms and densities. At first this would be regarded as a type of wildest uproar and disorder, like a maelstrom, but it should be interpreted by the calm circle of light which environs it. Every dark and terrible abyss in nature is lighted with a like circle of Love." ([5], p. 125).

The passages quoted above make explicit Muir's conviction that the natural world was "Godful," a glorious manifestation of God's beauty and love, showing us windows and mirrors and sparks of God, the whole covered by God's love like a garment. Again, we note that Muir does not dwell on God Himself, but on the Godful beauty and love inherent in the features of the natural world. It is the plants, animals, rocks, water, and clouds that are the focus of Muir's attention and affection. Yet Muir does not explicitly mention this Godful dimension in every description of the natural world. He very often refers to nature, mountains, and forests without explicit mention of God. On his ten-day sled trip across the great icy expanse of Muir Glacier in Alaska in 1890, for example, he writes that "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." ([5], p. 313). But from the above quotations, his basic assumptions about Nature are clear, though Muir is not the least bit proselytizing when it comes to religion. All can see the glory of the natural world, whether they realize or believe it flows from God. And most importantly, as we shall see below, all can benefit from time in the natural world, quite regardless of whether they share the belief that Creation is shot through with the glory of God.

Nature as Healer of Broken Humans

Muir had a very low opinion of cities and civilization. In his experience, city-bound humans were "asleep," overwhelmed with care and anxiety, chained to schedules and stifling duties, ineluctably cut

off from the Godful zest of life to which they were meant to be yoked. The solution is to go to the mountains, where God's love and beauty are brimming and inescapable, transformative, health-giving.

After some months living with friends in Oakland and San Francisco while he wrote up his articles on glaciation, Muir eagerly returned to the mountains in the fall of 1874, confiding this in his journal:

"Tell me what you will of the benefactions of city civilization, of the sweet security of streets—all as part of the natural upgrowth of man towards the high destiny we hear so much of. I know that our bodies were made to thrive only in pure air, and the scenes in which pure air is found. If the death exhalations that brood the broad towns in which we so fondly compact ourselves were made visible, we should flee as from a plague. All are more or less sick; there is not a perfectly sane man in San Francisco." ([5], p. 191).

As early as 1871, just two years after arriving in California, Muir observes that "toiling in the treadmills of life we hide from the lessons of Nature. We gaze morbidly through civilized fog upon our beautiful world clad with seamless beauty...Civilized man chokes his soul as the heathen Chinese their feet." ([5], p. 82).

In his visit to the Sierras in the summer of 1869, Muir the reluctant shepherd is sketching Yosemite Valley from its rim, when suddenly he is struck by the conviction that a favorite professor of his from the University of Wisconsin three years previous was in the valley below him. He makes his way into the valley the next morning, incredibly finding the professor visiting there with a distinguished general. (This is one of three instances of Muir receiving seemingly telepathic messages.) After his visit with the astonished professor and the general, Muir climbs back to the high country through a canyon, and notes that night in his journal:

"I scrambled home through the Indian Canon gate, rejoicing, pitying the poor Professor and General, bound by clocks, almanacs, orders, duties, *etc.*, and compelled to dwell with lowland care and dust and din, where Nature is covered and her voice smothered,—while the poor, insignificant wanderer (Muir) enjoys the freedom and glory of God's wilderness." ([6], p. 250).

Muir is particularly galled by those who bring the cares and "civilized fog" of the cities with them into the mountains and wander blinded to the glories about them. In the following passage, written after his visit with the professor and the general, we are treated to a taste of Muir's frequently-employed dry Scottish wit:

"It seems strange that visitors to Yosemite should be so little influenced by its novel grandeur, as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped. Most of those I saw yesterday were looking down as if wholly unconscious of anything going on about them, while the sublime rocks were trembling with the tones of the mighty chanting congregation of waters gathered from all the mountains round about, making music that might draw angels out of heaven. Yet respectable-looking, even wise-looking people were fixing bits of worm on bent pieces of wire to catch trout. Sport they called it. Should church-goers try to pass the time fishing in baptismal fonts while dull sermons were being preached, the so-called sport might not be so bad; but to play in the Yosemite temple, seeking pleasure in the pain of fishes struggling for their lives, while God himself is preaching his sublimest water and stone sermons!" ([6], pp. 255–256).

A decade later, on his first trip to Alaska, Muir makes the same lament:

“So truly blind is lord man; so pathetically employed in his little jobs of town-building, church-building, bread-getting, the study of the spirits and heaven, *etc.*, that he can see nothing of the heaven he is in. Place (these blind) people who sing heaven and explore it so zealously here (in the mountains), and they would still be seeking it without guessing for a moment their present whereabouts.” ([5], pp. 257–258).

But to those who will open themselves to the beauty of the Godful mountains, Muir assures us that the dull sleep of the valley cities will be banished:

“Californians have only to go east a few miles (to the Sierra Nevada mountains) to be happy. Toilers on the heat plains, toilers in the cities by the sea, whose lives are well-nigh choked by the weeds of care that have grown up and run to seed about them—leave all and go east and you cannot escape a cure for all care. Earth hath no sorrows that earth cannot heal, or heaven cannot heal, for the earth as seen in the clean wilds of the mountains is about as divine as anything the heart of man can conceive!” ([5], p. 99).

What is the mechanism by which wilderness and mountains heal humans broken and lulled to sleep by city life and its cares? Muir expresses it in varying metaphors:

“The storms of winter which so exalt and glorify mountains strike terror into the souls of those who are unacquainted with them, or who have only seen the lights of cities, but to anyone who is in actual contact with the wilderness, these storms are only emphatic words of Nature’s love. Every purely natural object is a conductor of divinity, and we have but to expose ourselves in a clean condition to any of these conductors, to be fed and nourished by them. Only in this way can we procure our daily spirit bread.” ([5], p. 118).

“Snatch a pan of bread and run to the Tuolumne (valley). In whatever mood the lover of wilderness enters the Canyon, he speedily yields to the spell of the falling, singing river, and listens and looks with ever-growing enthusiasm until all the world besides is forgotten...Nature’s best gardens are here in deepest repose, fountains of wild ever-playing water falling in every form—the endless song of Creation shaking the devout listener into newness of life. He who enters will hear a music which will never cease to vibrate in his life throughout all its blurring moil and toil.” ([5], pp. 166–167).

“Yosemite Park is a place of rest, a refuge from the roar and dust and weary, nervous, wasting work of the lowlands...It is good for everybody, no matter how benumbed with care, encrusted with a mail of business habits like a tree with bark. None can escape its charms. Its natural beauty cleanses and warms like fire...The park is the poor man’s refuge. Few are altogether blind and deaf to the sweet looks and voices of nature. Everybody at heart loves God’s beauty because God made everybody.” ([5], pp. 350–352).

Later in his life, Muir admits that while the mountains most vividly embody the Godful healing environment of Nature, to the open eye even lowland Nature can heal. In a journal entry from 1895, the married Muir writes from the Strentzel family (now his) orchard in Martinez:

“Fine balmy day. Mount Diablo one mass of purple in the morning. Nature is always lovely, invincible, glad, whatever is done and suffered by her creatures. All scars she heals, whether in rocks or water or sky or hearts.” ([5], p. 337).

In one of his most oft-quoted journal entries, in 1890 Muir generalizes the healing power of wilderness, and calls it the great hope of the (human) world:

“In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and the wounds heal ere we are aware.” ([5], p. 317).

To Muir’s mind, the mechanism of healing is not just or even mainly a “spiritual” transformation of the soul, but rather an intriguingly *physical* effect of the Godful wilderness upon the *body* of the pilgrim.

“The Sierra. Mountains holy as Sinai...Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us 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.” ([5], p. 92).

“We are now in the mountains, and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal.” ([6], pp. 20–21).

“Sketching on the North Dome. It commands views of nearly all the (Yosemite) valley besides a few of the high mountains...These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God’s beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Drinking this champagne water is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the camp-fire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one’s flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable. One’s body then seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal.” ([6], pp. 174–175).

“Plain, sky, and mountains ray beauty which you feel. You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature.” ([2], p. 212).

Moreover, this physical transformation, this physical incorporation of God’s beauty and love consequent to exposure to wild Nature, this healing of the care and distractions and dullness of lowland city life, stays with the pilgrim as an immortal gift, claims Muir, and is not lost when one leaves the mountain:

“August 10 (1869).—Another of those charming exhilarating days that makes the blood dance and excites nerve current that render one unweariable and well-nigh immortal.” ([6], p. 270).

“These beautiful days must enrich all my life. They do not exist as mere pictures—maps hung upon the walls of memory to brighten at times when touched by association or will, only to shrink again like a landscape in the dark; but they saturate themselves into every part of the body and live always.” ([5], p. 53).

“Nature’s best gardens are here (in Tuolumne valley) in deepest repose, fountains of wild ever-playing water falling in every form—the endless song of Creation shaking the devout listener into newness of life. He who enters will hear a music which will never cease to vibrate in his life throughout all its blurring moil and toil.” ([5], pp. 166–167).

“Not in these fields, God’s wilds, will you ever hear the sad moan of disappointment, ‘All is vanity.’ No, we are overpaid a thousand times for all our toil, and a single day in so divine an atmosphere of beauty and love would be well worth living for, and at its close, should death come, without any hope of another life, we could still say, ‘Thank you, God, for the glorious gift!’ and pass on. Indeed, some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness, for these diverse days were so complete there was no sense of time in them, they had no definite beginning or ending, and formed a kind of terrestrial immortality. After days like these we are ready for any fate—pain, grief, death or oblivion—with grateful heart for all the glorious gift as long as hearts shall endure.” ([5], p. 301).

It is noteworthy that at the same time Muir’s vision of the natural world is inextricably predicated upon its being suffused with the beauty and love of God, his claim that exposure to the natural world, especially mountains, is transformative for humans has no requirement for any particular “belief” or “faith” upon the recipient of this transformation. That is, humans are transformed not by seeing the beauty and love of God in the natural world, and certainly not by “believing” any assertions about the nature of God, but wholly and simply by their presence in the natural world. Being there is enough, so long as you simply open your eyes and ears. (“Few are altogether blind and deaf to the sweet looks and voices of nature.”).

Saving the Natural World from Lord Man

It is mainly as a spirited and effective preserver of wilderness that John Muir is remembered today, of course. While it is perhaps too much to say that he single-handedly founded the conservation movement, it is surely accurate to observe that John Muir was among the several earliest and most effective voices for conservation of wilderness in America, that he served as a catalyst and rallying point for all that came afterwards, and that his influence is today felt more keenly than any other of the movement’s founders.

What was Muir’s motivation, his aim, for this activity? First of all, surprisingly, his motivation was not to save wilderness out of compassion for his fellow humans who needed wilderness for their physical and spiritual health. He very often resorted to this point as a persuasive reason why hard-headed men of power should set aside wilderness. But this was just a tactic. Muir, the man content to roam solitary through the wildest places on the continent for weeks on end, was indeed a merry fellow when he found himself in human company. Without doubt he loved to talk and to argue and tell tales. Clearly he enjoyed the company of men and women of all stations in life. He wished them well, and was utterly convinced that exposure to wilderness was essential to their well-being. But having said all that, there is no telling evidence in his writings that compassion for his fellow humans was what drove his conservation efforts.

Nor, surprisingly, was Muir driven by a religious zeal to honor God by preserving His Creation. Muir’s religion and concept of God was as unconventional as everything else about the man. Muir did not have the slightest notion that God needed defending, or that preserving wilderness was pleasing to God and therefore should be done.

Muir fiercely defended wilderness, rather, because he loved the Created order itself, *for its own sake*. Rocks and water and bears and giant sequoias and water ouzels and larkspurs were precious to

him and of ultimate worth. Their Godful beauty and vitality, the earthly and spiritual grace and power which infused them, convinced him to battle for *their* sake. Muir genuinely loved the natural world quite as much—probably more—than he loved humans, though he was no misanthrope. That the natural world should be destroyed—dug up, cut down, ground to pieces, dammed, polluted—by human activity was deeply repugnant to him. Commercial exploitation of the mountains was a sacrilege, an offense not so much to God as to His created order. Muir's precious, Godful friends in the natural world needed an ally against Lord Man, and Muir reluctantly stepped forward but step forward he did, as a matter of duty, of necessity. Muir would a thousand times rather be tramping through the natural world than writing articles and mapping strategies for preservation—but he had a solemn duty to protect his friends, and that he did, with the brilliance and success that accompanied everything he set himself to accomplish. Muir protected what he loved. He challenges us to do the same.

But it must be noted that Muir came rather late in his life to the conservation cause. He devoted his 20s and 30s to rambling to the Gulf and in the Sierra Nevada, charting glaciers and sequoias. In his early 40s he made his initial three trips to Alaska's glaciers. The remainder of his 40s into his early 50s were spent raising his family and securing them financially through intensive (and fabulously successful) work on the Strentzel farm and orchards. It was only in his early 50s that Muir finally turned to conservation in earnest, and the cause took up most of his time and energy until his death at age 76 in 1914.

America was introduced to Muir in the 1870s through articles based on letters and journal entries as he explored the Sierra Nevada, many of them edited and submitted to various newspapers and magazines by his early patron Jeanne Carr, wife of a professor of Muir's at the University of Wisconsin (who soon moved to the University of California at Berkeley). These articles attracted much attention, but Muir was too busy tramping the wilderness to do any serious work in conservation. Much to the chagrin of his early followers, Muir buried himself in family and orchard life throughout the 1880s. Finally, in the very late 1880s, with his family secure financially and his classic "tramping" days behind him, Muir was persuaded by his admirers to enter the fray and protect his beloved wilderness from the depredations of commercial Lord Man.

It was around a campfire at Soda Springs in Tuolumne Meadow in 1889 that Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson, an associate editor of New York City's *Century* magazine, hatched the plan to create Yosemite National Park, with generous boundaries that took in the surrounding watersheds and the peaks that created them. In 1892 Muir and like-minded admirers of the Sierra Nevada formed the Sierra Club in San Francisco, composed of Bay area lawyers and professors as well as mountaineers, with Muir the clear choice as President of the club, a position which he held until his death. Underwood's *Century* magazine and the Sierra Club quickly became focal points for the battles with timber, livestock, and mining concerns over access and use of the resources of not just the Sierra Nevada but throughout the United States. Muir was invited to be a member of the National Forestry Commission in 1896, and though he declined membership he served as a guide to the Commission to critical forests throughout the western United States and a consultant in their deliberations.

As it became clear in the late 1890s and early 1900s that Gifford Pinchot and his "wise use" version of conservation would not adequately protect wilderness, Muir became a leading advocate of the notion of setting wilderness aside as National Parks. In all these activities, Muir was an important voice among many for the protection of a range of sites, including (in addition to Yosemite, Sequoia,

and Kings Canyon National Parks in California), Mt. Rainier in Washington state, the Grand Canyon and the White River Forest Preserve in Colorado, extending the Sierra Forest Reserve to Mt. Shasta in California, Crater Lake in Oregon, and Glacier National Park in Montana. Muir brought to these battles all the brilliance that served him so well as an inventor in his 20s, a chronicler of glaciers in his 30's and early 40s, and an orchardist in his 40s. Surprisingly, he was a savvy political infighter. Invited to join the famous Alaska Expedition of railroad magnate Edward H. Harriman in 1899 as one of twenty three prominent scientists, Muir soon captivated the tycoon. Harriman invited him to his estate at Pelican Bay on Klamath Lake, Oregon after the expedition to reminisce about his childhood, with Harriman's stenographer following dutifully in walks and around campfires, resulting in *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*. When Muir needed a bit of political muscle in preservation battles in the 1900s, he upon several occasions called upon Harriman to use his influence in the corridors of Washington D.C., usually with impressive results.

The one battle in which Muir was unable to forge a victory was that for Hetch Hetchy, the lovely Yosemite-like valley with looming walls of granite where the Tuolumne River emerges from its mountain birthplace. Muir had discovered Hetch Hetchy in his ambles of the 1870s and the magical place had become his favorite "temple" in the wilderness and the subject of many lyrical descriptions of enchanted rambles. When the city of San Francisco proposed to dam the valley and dedicate its waters for its city-dwellers, Muir was horrified. "Dam Hetch-Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the hand of man." ([8], p. 425). Because Hetch Hetchy was part of Yosemite National Park, a great deal of legal (and even more illegal, Muir suspected) maneuvering was required from San Francisco to Washington D.C. The complex legal machinations wound their tortuous way for over a decade of thrust and counterthrust. The battle over Hetch Hetchy became a national *cause celebre*. Newspapers throughout the country took sides in editorials, most of them on Muir's preservation side. But in the end, brute political and financial power carried the day, and in late 1913 the last act was concluded and the city engineers of San Francisco began to plan and eventually construct the dam to flood the valley. Muir's earliest biographer, Linnie Marsh Wolfe, is convinced that the decade-long battle and final loss of Hetch Hetchy "shortened his life-span" and led to Muir's death a bit over a year later ([1], p. x). But the spectacular defeat at Hetch Hetchy did not negate the many battles Muir had helped to win. And his legacy as "the" American champion of wilderness and its transforming vitality is still strong today as we approach the century mark of his death. Muir lives, as the spiritual exemplar *par excellence* of the reverent stewardship of the natural world which was so dear to him.

Muir's stewardship of the natural world sprung directly from his conviction that nature was God's beauty and love made manifest. This conviction rested squarely on Muir's early abandonment of the anthropocentric view of reality and his shift to what we may call an alternative gaiacentric view, which we shall now delineate.

From Anthropocentrism to Gaiacentrism

Until he walked over the bridge spanning the Ohio River and began his thousand mile walk to Florida, Muir had been surrounded by the traditional view that humans were set apart by God to have dominion over the earth and exploit it—anthropocentrism. The Bible was entrenched as the source of

ultimate knowledge of man and the world in his Calvinist Scottish home, and Genesis told him that alone of all the earth's creatures, man had been created in God's own image, and charged by God to have dominion over the earth. The Wisconsin frontier in which he lived from his eleventh to twenty-second year was a graphic example of exploiting the earth, with Muir taking an all-too active part in the process twelve or more hours a day—as long as there was light—transforming the Midwest woodlands into a farm, homestead, and wells. His two and a half years at the University of Wisconsin exposed him to the larger world, and people who were thinking new thoughts, but they were very busy years, crowded with both classes and working hard still to support himself.

But on his thousand mile walk, Muir was finally alone and free to move, observe, and think. His journal reveals the quick and sure abandonment of the anthropocentric view of the world, and its replacement by a wider—much wider—view. It begins with the alligators of the southern swamps through which he slogged:

“Many good people believe that alligators were created by the Devil, thus accounting for their all-consuming appetite and ugliness. But doubtless these creatures are happy and fill the place assigned them by the great Creator of us all. Fierce and cruel they appear to us, but beautiful in the eyes of God. They, also, are his children, for He hears their cries, cares for them tenderly, and provides their daily bread...How narrow we selfish, conceited creatures are in our sympathies! how blind to the rights of all the rest of creation!...alligators, snakes...are part of God's family unfallen, undepraved, and cared for with the same species of tenderness and love as is bestowed on angels in heaven or saints on earth.” ([2], pp. 98–99).

Note here the interesting suggestion that alligators, snakes, and presumably other creatures are distinguished from humans by being “unfallen, undepraved.” The inference is that only humans have fallen from God's original Grace and require saving; the rest of creation retains the original Godful glow of Creation. Muir seems to be suggesting that the salvation of humans merely restores us to that status that the other creatures have never lost—not a doctrine commonly emphasized in Calvinism or Catholicism! Nor is this singular suggestion confined to his early and first ramble. On his ten-day sled trip on Muir Glacier in Alaska two decades later, Muir writes the oft-quoted comment that “In God's wilderness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.” God's wilderness is “unredeemed” precisely because it has never fallen and required the redemption needed by humans.

Somewhat later in his thousand mile walk journal Muir's thinking switches from the glories of alligators to the folly of humans:

“The world, we are told, was made especially for man—a presumption not supported by all the facts...He (God) is regarded as a civilized, law-abiding gentleman in favor either of a republican form of government or of a limited monarchy; believes in the literature and language of England; is a warm supporter of the English constitution and Sunday schools and missionary societies; and is purely a manufactured article as any puppet of a half-penny theater.

With such views of the Creator it is, of course, not surprising that erroneous views should be entertained of the creation...Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of

creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.” ([2], pp. 136–139).

Muir not long after enlarged his view even further, adding the time dimension and sketching in his journal a vision of Creation breathtaking in its breadth and sophistication:

“This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation’s plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.” ([2], p. 140).

It is conventional among Muir biographers to call this a shift to biocentrism. If we confine our view to the journal of the thousand mile walk, that may be accurate. But Muir soon saw the Sierra Nevada in California, and quickly the “Range of Light” led him to further broaden his vision, to include not just the plants and animals of what we today call the *biosphere*, but rocks and water as entities also bursting with spiritual life:

“(The waters of Yosemite Falls) moved over the brink with songs that go farther into the substance of our being than ever was touched by man-made harmonies—songs that bear pure heaven in every note. The fleecy, spiritualized waters take the form of mashed and woven comets, going with a grace that casts poor mortals into an agony of joy.” ([5], p. 43).

“How interesting to trace the history of a single raindrop (in a Sierra storm)...God’s messenger, angel of love sent on its way with majesty and pomp and display of power that make man’s greatest shows ridiculous...From form to form, beauty to beauty, ever changing, never resting, all (the raindrops) are speeding on with love’s enthusiasm, singing with the stars the eternal song of creation.” ([6], pp. 167–170).

“Yonder stands the South (Half) Dome, its crown high above our camp, though its base is four thousand feet below us; a most noble rock, it seems full of thought, clothed with living light, no sense of dead stone about it, all spiritualized, neither heavy looking nor light, steadfast in serene strength like a god.” ([6], p. 171).

“The surface of the ground (atop Mt. Hoffman)...shines and sparkles with crystals; mica, hornblende, feldspar, quartz, tourmaline...every crystal...a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.” ([6], p. 205).

Muir’s radical shift of view from anthropocentrism goes beyond biocentrism, then, to include the whole planet. Everything is alive, bursting with spiritual grace. We may call his view, then, *gaiacentrism*. That view, that all of our created world has beauty, wonder, and status, that no one part of that wondrous whole has the right to hold dominion over the rest, challenges us even today. The struggle between anthropocentrism and *gaiacentrism* is far from being decided, and Muir’s groundbreaking and eloquent espousal of *gaiacentrism* continues to inspire, continues to serve as one of the most challenging aspects of Muir as spiritual exemplar.

John Muir with Bamboo Hat and Calabash

Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to classify Muir: was he a Transcendentalist, a pantheist, a deist, a theist? The first tortured modernist, consciously creating the New Adam? [9,10] Most of those attempting to categorize Muir have been scholars of history, literature, or religious studies. As a scientist and modest mountaineer, it strikes me that the Muir biographies by Wolfe, Wilkins, Worster, Cohen, and Turner somehow do not sufficiently credit Muir as the accomplished scientist that he was, nor how incredible his mountaineering feats were, in his time or ours [1,3,8,9,11]. The sole exception to the latter point is the biography by Michael Cohen [9], the author himself being an accomplished mountaineer.

As regards the congenial game of identifying which cultural or intellectual tradition Muir “fits” into most satisfyingly, a simple reading of his writings convinces me that in fact Muir must be recognized as the Christian that he was. His writings are full of references to God and quotations from both the Old and the New Testaments (though more often from the former), and Muir finds this Christian framework adequate to express his convictions. True, he rejects the anthropocentric viewpoint, and we hear little of a wrathful God or specific mention of Christ’s sacrifice saving sinful humans, but it must be remembered that the 19th century was a time of great tumult in the Christian religion, in both Muir’s native Scotland and in America, when widely varying interpretations of the tenets of the religion were advocated by various groups [12]. Muir’s version of Christianity was by no means outside the pale, though his shift to a gaiacentric point of view was unusual (but even this was foreshadowed, for example, by St. Francis of Assisi, and echoed later by Albert Schweitzer). That Muir’s wide reading encompassed Emerson, Thoreau, and Darwin and his views influenced by them is true; but that influence did not lead him to reject his fundamental Christian stance.

Given this, I find it intriguing—uncanny, even—that as I read Muir’s writings and the various biographies of Muir I am often reminded of experiences I’ve had in China, and of passages from Taoist writings.

John Muir was by no means the first or most prominent espouser of mountains as restorers of health and vitality. In the summer of 1985 my mountaineer friend Kyle and I were trudging up steep stone steps cut a thousand years ago into the granite of Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain) in Anhui province. We were not alone. Crowds of Chinese of all ages were passing us by, unencumbered by the packs we carried, chattering and joking. Not only were we the only westerners on the mountain, we were the only people carrying their own provisions, everyone else having hired eleven and twelve-year-old girls to pack their gear to the hostel at the top for them. On several occasions more than gear was being carried to the top of the mountain: shriveled old ladies passed us also, slouched down in palanquins weighing far more than the ladies themselves. The palanquins were carried, though by pairs of stout peasant lads rather than girls.

Our company on Huang Shan resulted from mountains having been considered sources of health and vitality for several millennia in China, cosmic pillars where the *qi* of earth connects with the *qi* of heaven, and thus nodes of power. Being on a mountain permits you to connect with this *qi* energy, restoring vitality and health. While this is a somewhat different explanation than Muir offered, the essentials are the same: *you connect with something powerful on the mountain, and you are healed and revitalized*. Travelers among the mountains has been a major genre in Chinese art for a thousand years

(see, for example, *Traveling Among Streams and Mountains*, from the 12th century Jin dynasty, or *Festival of the Peaches of Longevity*, from 14th century Ming dynasty, both at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City).

Dawn is an especially powerful time for the flow of *qi*, so Kyle and I joined hundreds others an hour before dawn the next morning, donning the bulky “Mao coats” hanging on hooks on the doors. Thus muffled against the chill we joined the throngs making their way in the utter darkness to the vista point looking east. As with the climb up the mountain, the dawn viewing was a festive, celebratory occasion. As the sky lightened, then was pierced with first mauve then purple then red bolts streaking through the clouds, the crowd quieted, awestruck. The clouds rendered the dawn ambiguous and rather anticlimactic—but no matter. Everyone quickly dropped into a *qi*-heightened celebratory mood again and made for the refectory for hot tea, rice congee, and pickled vegetables.

Although we slept atop the mountain in a crude hostel that night, sleeping Muir-style on the ground is not unknown. Atop another mountain a thousand years earlier, the poet Li Po (or Li Bai) recounted his experience:

To refresh our sorrow-laden souls
We drink wine deep into the splendid night,
Its moonlight charm far too precious for sleep.
But at last the wine overtakes us
And we lay down on the innocent mountain
The earth for pillow, the stars for cover.

(Barnett translation)

China for millennia has known unusual men who roamed the mountains seeking (and then enjoying) wisdom and the ecstasy of mountains. These mountain rambles are the Taoist sages who search for Immortality, full immersion in the *tao* that imbues all the world but, like *qi*, especially in mountains ([13], Ch. 9). Such were The Two Perfected Lords Wang and Kuo, first mentioned in inscriptions of the eighth century, and described in the early Sung dynasty (tenth century) *Veritable Record of the Two Perfected Lords* ([14], Ch. 3). Wang and Kuo are seeking a mountain described to them by their teacher (Muir aiming for the Sierra Nevada!) and “made no excuse of distance, but took up their calabashes, put on bamboo hats, and made straight for Chiang-nan.” ([14], p. 53). They follow a winding path, traversing thirty-four mountains, gathering medicinal plants as they go (botanists, like Muir!). Observe how Muir-like their journey sounds:

“They went to a place called Ch’i-li Mountain, uniquely grand in shape. They looked at each other and said: ‘This mountain is auspiciously fine in scenery, truly a spot for divine immortals’ cultivation and refinement.’ Then they continued five li, to where the mountains were tall and hard; they saluted left and bowed right. The fine streams faced forward like family branches, spanning a hundred li. The thousand hills saluted in rings, like tigers crouching or dragons coiling. The Two Perfected climbed the mountain and perched and rested together. The day now grew late; a pure breeze came softly; a bright moon stood in the void. The Two Perfected took the shade of a pine and chatted and laughed, forgetting to sleep. With first dawn, they looked off to the south at the mountain’s summit and made their obeisances and inquiries to the three peaks of (Mt.) Hua-kai. When they were finished, the mists suddenly cleared, and right before their faces stood the three peaks, like a cliff, thrusting out far beyond the skies. The Two Perfected rejoiced.” ([14], p. 55).

Today Mt. Hua-kai and surrounding mountains are dotted with shrines and altars to The Two Perfected Lords and to their teacher. Pilgrims climb to the shrines and light cedar incense to pay their respects to the Two Perfected Lords, just as today in the Sierra Nevada mountaineers young and old climb to the Sierra high country and pay their respects around campfires to John Muir.

Specific thoughts and practices of Muir are uncannily reflected in the Taoist mountain tradition. Spirit flight is a frequent phenomenon in literature about Taoist masters, where a sleeping Taoist's spirit leaves his body and soars abroad into far realms. Here is Muir, after a strenuous day in Hetch Hetchy and the Tuolumne River canyon above it:

“No sane man in the hands of Nature can doubt the doubleness of his life. Soul and body receive separate nourishment and separate exercise, and speedily reach a stage of development wherein each is easily known apart from the other...My legs sometimes transport me to camp, in the darkness, over cliffs and through bogs and forests that seem inaccessible to civilized legs in the daylight. In like manner the soul sets forth at times upon rambles of its own. Our bodies, though meanwhile out of sight and forgotten, blend into the rest of nature, blind to the boundaries of individuals. But is after both the body and soul of a mountaineer have worked hard, and enjoyed hard, that they are most palpably separate. Our weary limbs, lying at rest on the pine needles, make no attempt to follow after or sympathize with the nimble spirit that, apparently glad of the opportunity, wanders alone down forges, along beetling cliffs, or away among the peaks and glaciers of the farthest landscapes, or into realms that eye hath nor seen, nor ear heard; and when at length we are ready to return home to our flesh-and-bone tabernacle, we scarcely for a moment or two know in what direction to seek for it.” ([5], pp. 77–78).

Indeed, scarcely knowing where to return from these spirit flights was not a problem only for Muir. One of the fabled Eight Immortals of Taoist tradition was completely unable to find his body (a disciple had burned it, thinking the Master was dead), and had to commandeer the body of a recently-deceased lame beggar to return to: thus Li T'ieh-kuai is the rough-looking Immortal with the iron crutch under his arm, his calabash strung about his neck (as, for example, in Huang Shen's Qing dynasty *Portrait of the Immortal Li T'ieh-kuai*, or Shang Hsi's Ming dynasty *Four Immortals Conveying Longevity*, both in Taipei's National Palace Museum.)

Such references to spirit flight are not uncommon in Muir's writings. In a letter to Jeanne Carr, upon her urging him to leave the mountains and return to Oakland to write, he proclaims “I will not be done here for years. I am in no hurry...My horse and bread are ready for upward...I will fuse in spirit skies!” ([5], p. xvii). And in his journal: “If my soul could get away from this so-called prison, be granted all the list of attributes generally bestowed on spirits, my first ramble on spirit wings would not be among the volcanoes of the moon...I should hover about the beauty of our own good star (planet).” ([5], p. 43). At Cathedral meadow below Cathedral Peak (from which my son and I have admired the magenta glow of the setting sun on the peak), Muir writes in his journal, “Altitude 9820 feet. Night of August 16, 1872. In full moon, all the horizon is lettered and lifted. I want immortality to read this terrestrial language. This good and tough mountain-climbing flesh is not my final home, and I'll creep out of it and fly free and grow!” ([5], p. 89).

Indeed, Muir at times says things eerily reminiscent of China's Taoist tradition. While camping on the rim of the Grand Canyon with Gifford Pinchot (later his bitter enemy), Muir writes: “September 29, 1896. An hour before sunset we chose a fine camp among the little pines and cedars, collected

wood—cedar as incense to the gods—and camped for the night.”([5], p. 363). One expects Muir to add at the end of the entry: “Felt close to the Two Perfected Lords of Mt. Hua-kai”! Or consider this entry: “The Merced river (running through Yosemite Valley) is now at earnest work with all the beauty and poetry of unmarred nature. In the middle of the stream are immense rock islands hewn from the grandly sculptured walls. I wished to camp in midstream on a flat, smooth rock.”([5], p. 56). How this entry echoes the poem *A Green Stream* by Wang Wei written a thousand years earlier, which ends with “Oh to remain on a broad, flat rock, casting a fishing line forever.” ([15], p. 162).

Muir’s journal entries often have the distinct feel of Chinese poetry. Consider this:

“I walk down from the canyon to the lake, and around the lake to gather wood. Warm lappings of Scotland memory. Distant mountains dim in storm. Lake, mountain, sky, all one black at last...The drip, drip of water on my bed of cedar fragments. Slant snowflakes in light of fire...must sleep and wake.” ([5], p. 84).

These extensive similarities between Muir and Taoist wanderers of the mountains a thousand years ago suggest several things to me. First, there must exist some fundamental deep structure of mountains, a structure that inheres to mountains in California as well as China. Second, there must exist a physiological deep structure to human perception and experience that recognizes and is attracted to the mountains, whether the humans are Scottish, American, or Chinese. These two fundamental deep structures—of mountains and of humans throughout the world—would explain the striking similarities between Muir’s account of mountains and those of the Two Perfected Lords of the Taoist tradition.

In a similar vein, it is clear that the separate traditions of Christianity and Taoism each contain concepts and vocabulary that permit the articulation and interpretation of this sublime human experience of mountains. The concepts and vocabulary are of course different (God’s creation event producing a world shot through with Godful beauty and love, *versus* the Tao engendering yin and yang phenomenon enlivened by qi energy) but the descriptions of the experience are sufficiently similar to convince us that the human experience is basically the same. In this sense, then, Muir and the Two Perfected Lords of Mt. Hua-kai show us that the Christian and the Taoist traditions, though widely separated and with virtually no interaction, allow the expression of universal human values. And we must suspect that other religious traditions will offer the same capability of expression to members of their tradition as well. I admit to thinking that the shared, universal experiences are of utmost interest to me, beyond the varied forms of their expression in the various traditions.

Conclusion: Muir’s Legacy

If there is anything unique to Muir’s situation, it is that he existed at a specific time in a specific cultural milieu featuring a young democratic society. Therefore, in seeing his beloved wilderness being destroyed, he also saw he had the ability and opportunity to protest and mitigate this destruction. Avenues and forums were available to Muir to publicly articulate God’s beauty and love manifest in the American wilderness, and to rally allies to fight to protect it from the depredations of Lord Man. He devoted the last two decades of his life to this cause, achieving remarkable successes and a few noteworthy failures. In thus playing a key role in the founding of the American environmental

movement, Muir stands out as a spiritual exemplar for the love and protection of a creation of God that is itself “Godful”.

References

1. Wolfe, L.M. *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*; Univ. Wisconsin Press: Madison, WI, USA, 1945.
2. Bade, W.F., Ed. *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*; Houghton Mifflin Mariner Books: New York, NY, USA, 1998.
3. Wilkins, T. *John Muir: Apostle of Nature*; Univ. Oklahoma Press: Norman, OK, USA, 1995.
4. Muir, J. *Travels in Alaska*; Houghton Mifflin: Boston, MA, USA, 1979.
5. Wolfe, L.M., Ed. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*; Houghton Mifflin: Boston, MA, USA, 1979.
6. Muir, J. *My First Summer in the Sierra*; The Modern Library: New York, NY, USA, 2003.
7. Teale, E.W., Ed. *The Wilderness World of John Muir*; Houghton Mifflin Mariner Books: New York, NY, USA, 2001.
8. Worster, D. *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*; Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford, UK, 2008.
9. See Cohen, M.P. *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*; Univ. of Wisconsin Press: Madison, WI, USA, 1984.
10. A wider perspective is given in Gatta, J. *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*; Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford, UK, 2004.
11. Turner, F. *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours*; Viking Press: New York, NY, USA, 1985.
12. Herman, A.; The Proper Study of Mankind I. In *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*; MJF Books: New York, NY, USA, 2001; pp. 62–85.
13. Schipper, K. The Immortals. In *The Taoist Body*; Univ. California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 1993; pp. 160–183.
14. Hymes, R.; Hua-Kai Mountain and Its Immortals; In *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China*; Univ. California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 2002; pp. 26–47.
15. Bynner, W. *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology*; Anchor Books: Garden City, NY, USA, 1964.