

Wild Swimming and Spirituality

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell berry

Today, through our readings we are encouraged to reflect on the nature of the created world and the universe. To consider its wider purpose and meaning. Has it been crafted by a loving creator, or was the universe created by pure chance, with no intention or purpose behind it at all?

Scripture is clear about there being 1) a Creator 2) the whole cosmos being ordered according to a design and purpose.

But, I wonder what you think? Belief in a benevolent Creator, is definitely no longer the majority view of the western world, in which empiricism dominates thinking about nature and reality. We have become focused more on what is there to be observed and understood, than on broad narratives about meaning, purpose, intention and value.

Nonetheless, in the context of the climate crisis, biodiversity collapse, global warming, and our own sense of fearful alienation from the natural world, it might be time to re-think this perspective. To consider:-

What might be the root causes of such a broken relationship with our natural environments? Can we repair them?

For a while now I have been thinking about wild swimming and spirituality. I always used to swim inside in a swimming pool, but over the last few years I have discovered outdoor swimming. It is not only me, outdoor swimming has seen an exponential rise after the pandemic; tv programmes, podcast, films, newspaper articles reflect the trend. Everyone seems to be getting in water outside, in lakes, rivers, outdoor pools and the sea.

This has led me to reflect on the difference between swimming in my local swimming pool, and swimming outside. I wonder about the nature and language of water and what it might be trying to communicate. The indoor swimming pool is something of a metaphor for how the culture of 21st century UK utilises water for leisure and exercise. The swimming pool's artificial environment, ambient temperature, and unnaturally blue water, reveals a particular approach to natural resources. The clear, blue water in our indoor pools is maintained by the use of chemicals; whilst it's heated through fossil fuels to maintain a perfect temperature. The water in the pool contrasts to the water in our landscapes which is a recipient of deadly chemical run-off and sewage. Week after week newspapers report on the dumping of raw sewage and agricultural run off in our rivers and seas. The Guardian reported 83% of our rivers contain evidence of high levels of pollution from sewage and agricultural run-off. We swim in pure blue water inside and yet the water in our rivers and seas is a recipient of our waste products; hardly pure and blue at all.

Water has long been a metaphor within major religious traditions for healing, purity, and wholeness. Ritual ablution across traditions speak of the need for purity and cleanliness that is ethical as well as literal. Jesus critiqued the religious rituals of hand washing in his day, whilst talking about offering water that will 'well up' and bring eternal life: 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (Jn. 4:14). His own baptism, a rite that expresses washing and new birth, by John at the River Jordan, is a moment of revelation, at which the voice from heaven declares Jesus as 'Son': 'A voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11). Baptism rituals in the early church soon developed into elaborate rites that spoke powerfully and dramatically of death to the old self and new birth. Is water just a symbolic sign, or is it of deep value in and of itself? I think that the wild swimming trend is about a rediscovery of the value and purpose of water not just as a resource, or commodity, but as it is, in itself. It is a gift of God in creation.

At the local, Cambridge, Jesus Green Lido, all through the winter season a 'Sunday-serotonin swim' is organised, to encourage cold-water dipping and the attendant health benefits. This cold-water swimming trend is in explicit contrast and challenge to the artificial, indoor water- worlds, with the perfect ambient temperature. This outdoor context, with the extended length of the pool (100 yards), the beautiful trees that surround it and the cold, cold water, is an invitation to many today, it seems, to step outside of our comfort zones. People talk about how it makes them feel alive, how it has helped them recover from life traumas, and the way in which in the outdoor environment community is created, people talk to strangers and make new friends. Many other groups of outdoor swimmers meet on beaches or on riversides, where they encounter mud and reeds, insects and animals, fishes, and all sorts of life

during their swim. There are no lifeguards or changing rooms, just friends and chatter, flasks, and nakedness. There is an authenticity about the experience that people are longing for.

In real water we encounter other life-forms that swarm, or grow, that swell, or flash. In stepping into the wild we step out of our human-made and controlled zones devoid of otherness; we move into stranger worlds. Stepping into the wild also means realising that our rivers are dying, that we're being robbed of our natural assets, and that we're being offered alternative fake worlds that can't satisfy or truly heal.

Jesus' words echo in my ears: 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (Jn. 4:14). The water that God gives is real and true, it is a water that we long for and need. Our readings today remind us that Creation is holy and blessed, infused with the divine spirit and made for good purposes. Divine wisdom was there at the beginning of creation, directing and inspiring all that was to happen.

For me this means that activities that bring us closer to nature are in many respects spiritual- they allow us contact with the sacred quality of the created universe. Worship, prayer, and spiritual practice for many today is not located in Christian buildings, but in the wider world. These spiritual activities can help foster love for and care for our local environments, as well as enabling us to feel closer to God/the divine/ the transcendent. Cultivating our spirituality in the natural world seems to be an essential practice in our nature impoverished times.

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