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LAND ETHIC

Paper presented to Dr. Joe Nix
by Margie Reyenga to complete
requirements for Honors Directed Study

Ouachita Baptist University
Arkadelphia, Arkansas
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I once heard a man speak that his purpose in living was to appreciate life. The theme of this paper has somewhat the same message to convey. The life he spoke of and of which I am to write didn't entail only human beings but encompassed the whole natural world with its interlocking dependencies of abiotic and biotic components. The implication of his thought to me was profound, for it seems the vast majority of us live not in appreciation of life, but rather in the acquisition of material securities.

Its odd and has been a painful fact to me that most people (supposedly, for philanthropy is constantly spoken of) have never considered the welfare of anything but other people (or rather themselves). A feeling has prevailed that men have not progressed until more and more people bring their money together and occupy a spot. Why everyone knew a farm hadn't been improved until most of the trees were cut and the weeds eradicated to make room for pastures or soy bean fields. Then of course fencing had to be planted so each man could hold in all of his property, then he must further subdivide it with more fences to separate cows from cows, and cows from pigs, and pigs from soybeans, etc.... The preceding was no doubt an over simplification, but the point of it is that we completely ignore the balanced ecosystem that took eons to evolve. As Aldo Leopold wrote "It was only after we pondered on these things that we began to wonder who wrote the rules for progress.... there is yet no sense of pride in the husbandry of wild plants and animals, no sense of shame in the proprietorship of a sick landscape."

And in the long run is our selfish haste to obtain many and quick products worth it. What is yielded. A novelist of contemporary times, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has written

Most of the true tales of masterfulness in new environments with new technologies have been cruel or greedy, it seems to me. The concepts of reality held by the masterful people have customarily been stupid or solipsistic in retrospect. Nobody has been remarkably secure, the masters have often ceased to be masters quickly. There have been tremendous messes to be cleaned up, ravaged landscapes dotted by shattered Earthlings and their machines. Stupid.²

An example of ravaged landscapes being when

they envisaged farms not only around but in the marsh. An epidemic of ditch digging and landbooming set in. The marsh was gridironed with drainage canals,...

But crops were poor and beset by frosts.... Farmers moved out. Peat beds dried, shrank and caught fire.... No man raised his voice against the waste, only his nose against the smell. After a dry summer not even the winter snows could extinguish the smoldering marsh. Great pockmarks were burned into field and meadow,.... the cranes were hard put,.... the high priests of progress knew nothing of cranes, and cared less. What is a species more or less among engineers. What good is an undrained marsh anyhow.³

It may be just another broad false statement to say the majority seek mainly material securities, for most know "the meaning of life is not exhaustively explained by ones business life, nor is the deep desire of the human heart answered by a bank account."⁴ I realize everyone isn't out to gain cold material objects, but it does so often seem that way that "I sometimes wonder whether humanity has missed the real point..."⁵ One may think the deeper values are too difficult (or nonexistent) to attain. The rapid

pace of technology and the 'norms' of progress breed a laziness and passivity - it is so much easier (quicker) to acquire mass produced objects than 'to step to a different drummer'⁶ and seek intangible wealth.

A reality that we must become sensitive to is the diminishing wilderness, so much of which is lost in the name of progress and much through ignorance and indifference. Sensitive and farsighted writers have tried to awaken in us an understanding of the detrimental effects lost wilderness will have on both other species and us. For as it is diminished so are we. It often seems that we can see this, yet we choose to close our eyes. Thoreau wrote

We need the tonic of wilderness.... We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder cloud,.... We need to witness our own limits transgressed and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.'

Or as a Frenchman expressed it 'The green grass, the silent forest, the gentle breeze and the brook relieve my tired spirit and give me back to myself.'⁸

Loren Eiseley felt that living nature has worth in that somewhere therein lies the secret of life. As he studied nature in autumn

Beautiful, angular and bare the machinery of life will lie exposed, as it is now, to my view. There will be the thin, blue skeleton of a hare rumbled in a heap, and crouching over it I will marvel, as I marvel now, at the wonderful correlation of parts, the perfect adaptation to

purpose, the individually vanished and yet persisting pattern which is now hopping on some other hill. I will wonder as always in what manner 'particles' pursue such devious plans and symmetries. I will ask once more in what way is it managed, that the simple dust takes on a history and begins to weave these unique and never recurring apparitions in the stream of time. I shall wonder what strange forces at the heart of matter regulate the tiny beating of a rabbits heart or the dim dream that builds a milkweed pod.⁹

Previously mentioned writers have indicated that as nature is destroyed, so also are certain intangible values. There are also practical benefits to be derived. Bertrand de Jovenal feels that being separated from nature we have forgotten that we ultimately depend on her for life. He says western man

'tends to count nothing as expenditure, other than human effort; he does not seem to mind how much mineral matter he wastes and, far worse, how much living matter he destroys. He does not seem to realize at all that human life is a dependent part of an ecosystem of many different forms of life. As the world is ruled from towns where men are cut off from any other form of life other than human, the feeling of belonging to an ecosystem is not revived. This results in a harsh and improvident treatment of things upon which we ultimately depend, such as water and trees.'¹⁰

Considering that living organisms are composed mostly of water (of course other elements and chemicals are complexed in) - it is important not to destroy the water cycle as it presently exists. (e.g. 'The cycle of life is intricately tied up with the cycle of water.... the water system has to remain alive if we are to remain alive on earth.'¹⁰) Maybe organisms could be considered to be

water sacks with differing types of skins and taking on myriad shapes, structures, and sizes. These water sacks are being ruled by natural laws, their physical environment, subtle intangibles, and their own inherent characters.

Wilderness is valued by some as a place to hunt. Thoreau felt boys were best introduced to nature and original part of themselves through hunting. But "no human being past boyhood will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child."¹¹

Hesse brings a similiar feeling out in a story he wrote - "The Wolf". The hunters in this story had not learned the lesson, they were callosed and indifferent - not in the least sensitive to the wolf's life nor its relation to the mountain. They had done proper ridding the world of one more evil animal.

Having broken its bones....
They laughed, they boasted, they sang,
they cursed; they were looking forward to
brandy and coffee. None of them saw the beauty
of the snow-covered forest or the radiance of
the high plateau, or the red moon which hovered
over the chasse ral, and whose faint light
shimmered on their rifle barrels, on the cry-
stalline snow and on the blurred eyes of a
dead wolf.¹²

Leopald also came to a time in his life when in a similiar unthinking manner he helped other men to fill a she-wolf and her pups with lead. He shot at her quite automatically - having had ingrained in him that wolves were always bad. But when he saw the green fire die in her eyes he realized he had killed something that was very dearly related to the mountain.

I was young then and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, no wolves would mean hunters paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither wolf nor mountain agreed with such a view.¹³

We have need to try to understand our natural environment, for it has worth and value far beyond just usefulness. As Christopher P. Stone has suggested, the natural environment should have standing (standing being the power to initiate action when its interests dictate) and therefore possess legal rights just as corporations and incompetents do. This would provide a tool for legally protecting the environment. A tool that will come into effect as our attitudes change.

In conclusion I doubt that appreciation for life has been properly put forth in this paper, for under currents of pessimism, haziness and my own ignorance and inability of expression have sometimes prevailed. But I do know that the quality of human life and other forms has already been diminished by our own myopia and anthropocentric ideas. And it is ironical that our good intentions have sometimes turned out to be detrimental in the long run. But it is to be accepted that we are limited beings of imperfect, but human qualities. And therefore we need chances to glimpse and absorb the purposefulness, wastelessness, beauty and health that nature has to offer as renewal and hope. An invisible strength is to be derived.

And that was true. I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing, yet there is something that throbs and gleams....

Yes, what gives them their beauty is something invisible.¹⁴

Footnotes

1. Leopald, Aldo A Sand County Almanac (Oxford University Press, 1968).
2. Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. Wampeters Foma and Granfalloons (Dell publishing Co. Inc., 1974).
3. Aldo Leopald A Sand County Almanac
4. Carl Jung. Man and His Symbols 1964
5. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Wampeters Foma and Granfalloons
6. Henry David Thoreau Walden (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1961).
7. Ibid.
8. Loren Eiseley The Immense Journey (Random House, 1957).
9. E. F. Schaumacher Small is Beautiful (First Perennial Library, 1957).
10. Odum. Fundamentals of Ecology.
11. Thoreau Walden.
12. Herman Hesse Stories of Five Decades (Farr, Straus and Girous, Inc., 1972).
13. Leopald A Sand County Almanac.
14. Antoine de Saint Exupery The Little Prince (Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1971).