

Awe, Wonder, and the Perspective of Naturalism
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION: a Broken Relationship

A recent United Nations policy brief titled “Mending the broken relationship with nature: tackling the biodiversity, ecosystems, health and climate change nexus post-COVID-19” asks this:

What are the concrete policy actions that can be implemented to mend the broken relationship between human societies and the environment and address, at the same time, the global biodiversity, climate and health crises?¹

It’s unfair to be all that critical of the writing that occurs within a bureaucracy. Still, notice the assumption built into the document. Quote:

to mend the broken relationship between human societies and the environment

Reflect for a moment: How far back in time did this breakage in the relationship occur?

And also reflect: Isn’t it convenient for Western societies to dissolve responsibility into “human societies” in general rather than taking some special responsibility?

Isn’t one of the aspects of indigenous cultures that Westerners admire—or at least pay lip-service to admiring—that they *do not* have a broken relationship with the environment?

Allow me to give you a for-instance . . .

ONE: A Story of a Place

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2021/mending-broken-relationship-nature-tackling-biodiversity-ecosystems-health-and-climate>

Many of you have heard my stories about my family farm.

That land had been stolen from the Shawnee Indians when, in 1830, they were driven west of the Mississippi, to eventually settle on a reservation in Oklahoma. The last vestiges of native activity ended in 1832, with the so-called Black Hawk War, actually a massacre perpetrated by Illinois militia.

Euro-Americans such as my family had been moving into the southern part of Illinois from North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. This illegal immigration (actually a sort of wink-wink-nod-nod between whites and the US government) was made legal by what is known as the Preemption Act of 1841. This sold land to Euro-Americans at \$1.25 per acre, which is roughly \$36.00 an acre in today's money.

(Be reminded that the US government did not have a personal income tax in those days, and so the sale of stolen indigenous land was one of the few revenue streams for the federal government.)

The Preemption Act required that the purchaser be a "head of household" over 21, a male or a widow; also, a US citizen or an immigrant who pledged to become a US citizen. The purchaser had to live on the land for at least six months before the purchase and had to "improve" the land.

Ah! There's the rub! That is where "the broken relationship between human societies and the environment" entered the picture for the farm I caretake today.

As you might expect, "improvement" meant European-style farming, building a house and barn, and cooperation in building roads.

In my childhood, stories of the indigenous peoples were common. We knew the hill where the winter village of a group of Shawnee had lived—The Shawnee were semi-nomadic. They grew crops in the warm months in one place, then wintered for hunting in another place.

We found arrowheads in the ditches, where they had been washed out of the ground by flooding. The constant reminder was, This wasn't all that long ago. Just a few floods ago.

As a kid, when I asked where the Shawnee had gone, the answer was, "Oh, they disappeared." Needless to say, that was not the true story. The Shawnee had been chased to Oklahoma.

#We all come from a geography. A place. For all of us, there are at least two geographical locations that we arrive from: the physical one that can be studied on maps and the place of our subjective imaginary.

#In my personal imaginary, I see “improvement” of the land as the first mistake. It was “improvement” that broke the relationship between human societies and the environment. The advent of industrialized agriculture only made the damage deeper and more extensive.

And, occasionally, I visit the graves of my forebears who did that breaking.

TWO: Made World, Improvable World

What did the breaking? People driven by an idea. A very bad idea.

#To distinguish between emotions and ideas: emotions drive human behavior, but any given emotion is short-lived in its effects. An idea, however, can sustain actions—good and bad—over long lengths of time; even generations.

It was the idea—mental construct—of what is known as *dualism*: the belief that there are two elements of our cosmos: 1) the material, which we can study empirically and 2) the spiritual, another cosmos real but undetectable except through emotion. Belief.

Particular religious practices.

In this dualistic scenario, the material world—the measurable cosmos—becomes something to be “improved” in whatever way human beings find profitable.

Where does this dualism come from?

Dualism is famously articulated in the book of Genesis, which has permeated Christianized societies.

BTW, notice how few people actually have read the stories. A report from LifeWay, a Christian media company, reveals that only 9% of Americans have read “all of it more than once.” (I’m in that category, as a good Sunday School kid.)

#Ten-percent have read “none of it” and 13% “only a few sentences.” In sum, over half of Americans have not read much of the bible.

Yet, here we are, saturated by the effects of the stories told there.

#The Genesis story sets up a dualism essentially between *us*—those possessed of a soul, which is immaterial, and those *things*—and they do become *things*—those things without a soul. The duality is made explicit as God talks with Adam and Eve when he kicks them out of the Garden of Eden:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28 KJV)

I remember asking my mother why killing animals is OK but killing people isn't. Her answer was, “Because animals don't have souls.”

That is, obviously, exactly the belief system that my family carried into the wilderness in order to “improve” it.

#The relationship between our society and the environment had been broken millennia before.

Based on a fanciful and erroneous story about there being two kinds of reality.

#This assumption of two realities—a spiritual and a material—became foundational to the European Christian mind and hardened into a story of why the majority of Europeans needed to be subjugated to the church and the monarch. Called the Great Chain of Being, the model postulated a pure God at the top and stones at the bottom.

Between, this mapping of “reality” explained why kings and priests ruled the common people, and it explained why the common people were left to “improve” the world of animals and plants and stones.

“Subdue” the earth and take “dominion” over it: God approves; the king approves; *you*, dear peasant, have no choice.

There is only one little problem with this way of seeing reality: *It is not* true. It is the biggest of the Big Lies ever.

This misunderstanding of reality has robbed billions of people through many generations of flourishing lives; and it has plundered the earth's resources; driven many species to extinction; and now we human beings are facing extinction ourselves.

A broken relationship. A pernicious idea.

#Now. Please hear me: I am not saying that human beings do not have experiences that we have been taught to call "spiritual." We do. It is merely that in the ancient world, many peoples—including the Hebrews, Greeks, and Persians, mistakenly divided reality between a material and a spiritual world, considering one better than the other.

The Shawnee people had not made that mistake.

#The old language is fine for what it does, but we today must realize that "spirit," the "soul," is consciousness. We human beings have consciousness, but so do other animals. And perhaps plants. And, who knows, perhaps the rocks and stones as well.

The Shawnee thought so.

The Senegalese conservationist Baba Dioum puts it this way:

In the end, we will conserve only what we love;
we will love only what we understand
and we will understand only what we are taught.

#My mother was taught that animals do not have souls. Trees don't have souls. The earth doesn't have a soul.

This was a malevolent teaching—we can perhaps say that it was inadvertently malevolent. But the result is the same.

It was the teaching of the monotheisms as they stamped out the much older human understand that all of nature is alive and deserves reverence. #Dualism was the teaching forced upon the peasants of Europe by Christian missionaries—this is, as my old teacher William Burroughs phrased it, the "one god universe" where there is no

magic aside from dictated magic; Burroughs contrasted this with the many-god universe where possibilities are everywhere and endless.²

Burroughs, unfortunately, found this a cause for paranoia.

I see it as a world of possibility.

#Many conventionally religious people, when they consider us un-conventionally religious and not-religious people, will start with what I call “the ain’t gots.” As in saying, “well, you ain’t got a god, so you ain’t got awe or wonder.”

Or “you ain’t got any morality or ethics.”

This is the same move that Christian missionaries made as they attempted to conquer the world—telling people with religions other than Christianity, “you ain’t got a heaven to go to” or “you ain’t got anything sacred in your life.”

“You ain’t got plans to upgrade and improve the planet.”

“So, we get to shoot you. We’re merely improving the planet, as god commands.”

THREE: Seeing “Things” as They Are

#The tragic Western mistake of dualism originates from a simple misunderstanding of reality. If you wish to be scientific about it, here are the words of biologist Ursula Goodenough:

Life from nonlife, like wine from water, has long been considered a miracle wrought by gods or God. Now it is seen to be the near-inevitable consequence of our thermal and chemical circumstances.

I suppose that beginning the book of Genesis with “In the beginning, as a product of the near-inevitable consequence of our thermal and chemical circumstances . . .” would not have made it the bestseller that it is.

² <https://sigg3.net/entry/1058>

#Naked people and snakes and flaming swords make for a blockbuster, no doubt. It's a good story. However, the *spin* on the story has led to horrendous consequences.

(I will get back to Ursula Goodenough in a bit.)

Some of you were here when Jacob Mullis and I talked with the author and podcaster J. F. Martel. He is the co-director of a podcast called "Weird Studies." I highly recommend their podcast if you're into . . . weird stuff.

In a recent podcast the hosts considered a book titled *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* by the Italian philosopher Federico Campagna.

To quickly summarize an extremely complex book, Campagna begins by saying we all live in a worldview that we experience as "reality." This system is passively (usually for most of us anyway) imposed and absorbed. This becomes a hegemonic cultural system. Most of us accept a reality-system with little in the way of questioning, at least in the large brush strokes.

As I've been saying, the default system in the Western world is the Christian dualistic reality-system. Dr. Campagna calls this reality Technic. A reality in which everything can be measured, and everything has a use. This is the I / It world of things as described by Martin Buber.

Magic is another system, a different way of seeing reality. Magic is the I / Thou world in which all reality is wrapped together.

The secular, naturalistic reality-system. Spirit and the material world are only artificially separated.

So it is that Ursula Goodenough, who popularized the concept of religious naturalism in her bestselling book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, says, "The most reliable joy is to be out of doors, to be a creature among other creatures."

"Among other creatures." #Religious naturalism is one way that Westerners escaping the dominant paradigm of Christian thought are going about re-accessing the awe of feeling that the world and the self, the material world and the spiritual world, are one and the same. What is being called religious naturalism merely means pursuing naturalism in a religious way.

#Critics of a naturalistic worldview often insist that awe and wonder are lacking in non-theistic perspectives. Clearly, they haven't asked a Humanist or a religious naturalist.

CONCLUSION

#If you want some wonder in your life, do a web search on the words "couch" and "stuck."

The results will have you wondering . . .

But awe That's different. Awesome.

#It's so easy to feel that we go through our lives somehow untouched by the reality around us. That is old, old cultural conditioning telling you the lie that you—your essence, your soul—that you are not your own body. We are *not* untouched; we are entangled in this all and all this.

#If you want awe in your life, try Magic. Sure, there's a card game called Magic, and there are wands and demons and levitating. That's not Magic. Magic is about consciously using your mind to rewrite the stories in your head that tell you that you are separate from the cosmos. It's a Big Lie.

Rather, we are inextricably intertwined with all the rest of nature—a enmeshed part of all that is.

#Perhaps ask yourself, Who broke my relationship with nature? Why? What am I going to *do* about that?

Perhaps try to mend that broken relationship between the human and the environment. Our technology will not save us.

Only our hearts and our ideas.

Perhaps try to see reality as the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius phrased it long ago—

. . . things coming into existence are not merely a string of things but a wondrous series of relationships. (*Meditations* 4.45)

There's awe for you. There is magic.

SOURCES

Robert Tapp, "The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism (a review)" in *TheHumanist.com*. 23 March 2021.

UN policy brief: "Mending the broken relationship with nature: tackling the biodiversity, ecosystems, health and climate change nexus post-COVID-19."