

Spring 2000 Monday Night Lecture Series

Science and Religion

Quakers and Nature: Perspectives from John Bartram to Friends Committee on Unity with Nature

May 22, 2000 *Louise Meschter Tritton*

Just a year ago, in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Bartram, I was asked by the Friends' Historical Association to give a talk at Bartram's Gardens on "Quakers and Nature." When Emma Lapsansky suggested the topic, I immediately told her that I didn't know much about it and that I would love the opportunity to learn. So, I would like to begin my remarks by thanking Emma Lapsansky, Betsy Brown and Diana Peterson from the Quaker Collections at the Haverford College Library for taking the time to suggest readings and to guide me in finding them, even when Steve Cary was in the main reading room expounding on Quakerism. Today's presentation builds on that first lecture and includes a year's worth of further reflection and insight.

In preparing for this lecture I have been engaged and excited by the process of reading the words of many Friends on nature. Because my original task was to talk about John Bartram, regrettably, perhaps, I do not include the works of his predecessors George Fox, William Penn, or other early Friends. But I think that you will see that my findings could easily be applied to them. The topic is complex, and my time is short, so my analysis is, in no way meant to be comprehensive. Rather, as I read the writings of Quakers on nature, several have themes emerged. These are the themes that I will share with you today. I invite you to join me in examining them, in the hopes that they will bring you new insights not only into nature and Quakers, but also into the relationship between the two.

First, a word of caution about the meaning of the word "nature." When I was teaching ecology at the University of Vermont, I asked students to bring to class some object that captured the meaning of "nature" to them. The variety of objects was impressive. Students brought in a pair of hiking boots, a bottle of water, and a bird feather, just to name a few. Then, I asked each person to explain what "nature" meant to him or her and how that meaning was captured in the object. The responses included: nature as a place of beauty (a sunset or a mountain vista seen on a hiking trip), nature as a source of unpolluted resources (spring water kept in a bottle) and, finally, nature as a force of terror (the remains of a songbird that had been killed and eaten by a hawk). These definitions were astounding in their variety and complexity.

I tell you this story to illustrate how the word "nature" can be used to mean everything from wilderness to the essence of humanity. It's a slippery word and the authors of the quotations I will read today rarely define exactly how they are using it. Rather than attempting to offer some quintessential definition, I simply caution you to keep an eye out for the richness and ambiguity of its use. Having said that, let us plunge ahead and see what we can learn about the Quakers who write about nature.

In short, four recurring themes emerged from my reading of works by Quakers from the time of John Bartram to the present. Nature is viewed from:

- 1) a scientific/rational perspective – illustrated by the journals of John Bartram
- 2) an aesthetic/romantic perspective – illustrated by the travels and drawings of William Bartram
- 3) a moral/ethical perspective – illustrated by the writings of John Woolman and Lisa Gould
- And 4) a social/political perspective - illustrated by Friends Committee on Unity with Nature.

Right away, you will say, that John Bartram was aesthetic and Woolman was political. And I will say, absolutely yes. These themes are not meant to be mutually exclusive, in any way. I am merely trying to highlight what seem to be dominant elements for the sake of discussion.

What I propose to do in the next 40 minutes or so, is to spend a few moments describing each theme, and sharing quotes from Quaker writers, in support of these themes. Then I will offer a summary of what I have learned from this approach. Finally, I will address the question of what, to my mind, characterizes these views of nature as Quaker. There will be plenty of time for discussion at the end, and I look forward to your insights and comments.

I. The first theme that emerged from my reading of Quaker writers, was that of nature from a scientific perspective. *Let me use this plant to illustrate some of the key elements of this perspective. As a scientist, the first thing I do when I look at this plant is to describe it: a whorl of horizontal branches densely*

set with deep green, awl-shaped leaves. Next, I want to name and categorize it: a Norfolk pine, Araucaria heterophylla (or sometimes Araucaria excelsa), a native of the Norfolk Islands and Australia where it sometimes grows to be as much as 200 feet tall with a trunk up to 10 feet across. In short, I determine truth about nature by making empirical observations with my physical senses and recording them in precise, unornamented language.

Born in 1699, John Bartram was a Quaker, a farmer, and a nurseryman, who lived in Philadelphia on the banks of the Schuylkill River near the mouth of the Delaware River. Bartram spent his life travelling around the eastern coast of what is now the United States and Canada, making just such empirical observations about nature, publishing his observations in letters and journals, collecting seeds and growing them in his gardens, and sending some 600 species to England. Although he had no academic degrees and was largely self-taught, Bartram was a scientist in the very essence of his approach to nature.

The story, possibly apocryphal, about how John Bartram came to be interested in botany is as follows:

“One day I was very busy holding my plow (for thee seest that I am but a simple plowman) and being weary I ran under the shade of a tree to repose myself. I cast my eyes on a daisy, I plucked it mechanically and viewed it with more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to do; and observing therein many distinct parts, some perpendicular, some horizontal. What a shame, said my mind, that thee shouldst have employed so many years in tilling the earth and destroying so many flowers and plants, without being acquainted with their structures and uses! This seeming inspiration suddenly awakened my curiosity for these were not thoughts to which I had been accustomed.” [Based on Hector St. Jean Crèvecoeur’s account, in *The Letters of an American Farmer*, and retold in Ernest Earnest’s book entitled “John and William Bartram: Botanists and Explorers.”]

When he looked out over the landscape, Bartram had an eye for the quality of the soil, the availability of water, and the different kinds of plants. The vegetation in his nursery was situated with regard for plant needs for sun, water, soil type, rather than color or aesthetic design. As a farmer, nature was the source of his livelihood. He knew the times for planting, the requirements of seeds, the vagaries of the weather, and the pleasures of a good harvest. He traveled after his harvesting was done. Not only were there fewer farm chores then, but fall was the right time to collect the seeds which he brought back to his garden so he could see what came up. He experimented with hybridization of plants, or “mules” as they were called then. It is said that Bartram harvested the wilderness as well as his farm, using both for domestic production of previously wild plants. [Analysis is based on Thomas Slaughter, 1996, The Natures of John and William Bartram]

In his 1996 book, The Natures of John and William Bartram, Rutgers University Professor Thomas Slaughter depicts John as “tolerant, humane, curious, observant, experimental, and not a bit sentimental.” Indeed, Bartram’s two published journals of the 1743 trip to Canada and the 1765-66 trip to Florida were written, in part, to impress the Royal Society of Philosophers in Britain with his ability to observe and be quantitative. Let me give you a sample:

“The top and south side of this ridge is midling land, half a quarter of a mile broad, and produced some wild grass, abundance of fern, oak, and chestnut trees. Descending the north side we found it more poor, steep and stony...good low land, with large trees of 5-leaved white, pine, poplar and white oak, here we dined by a spruce swamp.”

In this excerpt, Bartram’s style is empirical. He measures size and distance. He focuses on the potential usefulness of improved wilderness for farming. In his view,

A great ridge is “a mile steep”

Good soil is 3 feet deep

A creek is big enough to turn 2 mills

And plants are named to convey their uses. [Slaughter]

Thus, by his own reckoning, John Bartram wanted to figure out the structure and uses of plants. The nature he depicts is a rational, systematic, ordered way to look at a world in which, thanks to the Creator, everything has its place.

Now, let us turn back to my plant and my second theme:

II. That of nature from an aesthetic, emotional perspective. *This time, I look at this plant as an artist does – with pure delight. Look at the deep green of the needles – it reminds me of the lush forests of Northern New Zealand where Norfolk Island pines grow and where I once spent two glorious months of my life. The branches are like feathers – soft and delicate. Such symmetry, such glorious detail, such perfection! Give me my sketch pad and pencil and I will try to capture the beautiful truth of this moment on paper.*

In contrast to the focus of the scientist on the external, objective landscape, the romantic describes the subjective experience of nature. Nature ‘inspires’ feelings of love, awe, delight, or fear - in the observer. The purpose is to write, draw or paint in such a way that the observer remembers or experiences these emotions for him or herself. Truth is defined as truthfulness to feelings rather than facts.

According to several accounts, William Bartram, who lived from 1739 to 1823, was much more of a sensitive, artistic temperament than his father. His writings suggest that he was subject to the emotional highs and lows, the lack of success in business, and frequent poverty of spirit that are often associated with the artist. Whereas John Bartram’s writings evaluated the dimensions and farming potential of the landscape, William Bartram’s writings painted a landscape of color, feeling and drama [Slaughter].

For example, listen to his voice in the following description from his trip to Florida:

“What a most beautiful creature is this fish before me! Gliding too and fro, and figuring in the still clear waters, with his orient attendants and associates; the yellow bream or sunfish...is of a pale gold (or burnished brass) colour, darker on the back and sides...the fins are of an orange colour, and like all the species of the bream, it has a crescent of the finest ultramarine blue, encircled with silver, and velvet black, like the eye in the feathers of a peacock’s train.”

This description is just like one of Bartram’s paintings. It evokes the colors and shapes of the fish in analogy with an exotic creature, the peacock.

The Travels – his account of the journey up the Savannah River and south to St. Augustine, FLA from March 1773-Jan 1777 is an idealization of nature and self; it is, among other things, an ode to unspoiled natural beauty [Slaughter].

“How gently flow thy peaceful floods, O Altamaha! How sublimely rise to view, on thy elevated shores, yon magnolian groves, from whose tops the surrounding expanse is perfumed, by clouds of incense, blended with the exhaling balm of the liquidambar, and odours continually arising from circumambient aromatic groves of illicium, myrica, laurus and bignonia...”

This description uses all of the senses and those tell-tale romantic words “sublime, balm, and aromatic groves.”

Thomas Slaughter has the following to say about William Bartram:

“William accepted nature on its own terms – on God’s terms...wilderness was just as God intended without any improvement by man, without the clearing, tilling, and fencing that others, including his father, saw as natural beauty.”

Thus, in the best romantic tradition, William Bartram views nature as beautiful, aesthetic, and compelling. We are called to worship this beauty; to experience it for ourselves through his descriptions.

III. The third theme that I want to highlight is that of nature from a moral/ethical perspective. *Imagine, now, that I am a person searching for guidance about how to live in the world, and I turn to nature. This plant is a great metaphor for a right way to work in the world. The body of this plant has many parts: needles to absorb sunlight and produce food, roots to take up moisture, and a stem to transport both food and moisture to all of the other parts. All must cooperate for the plant to be vigorous and healthy. Likewise, the body of our Quaker meeting has many different people with different backgrounds and professions, some to anchor us, some to support us and some to reach for the sky; each has value; and all must cooperate for the meeting to be vigorous and healthy.*

This time, I have found in this plant a deeper spiritual truth. I have used nature as a metaphor for guidance from God. Indeed, the purpose of observing nature, from this perspective, is to ‘make visible the hand of God’, or to evoke God’s rules or guidance for human living. What is natural is somehow the way God meant it to be. We are asked to search inwardly for our place in this natural, moral landscape.

One of the best examples of this kind of writing, is the Journals and Essays of John Woolman [1971, edited by Phillips P. Moulton]. Woolman's intent was not so much to *describe* nature as it was to *describe the kingdom of God*, through nature.

Born in 1720, John Woolman worked as a shopkeeper, a tailor, a surveyor, an orchard-keeper, a teacher and he even drew up legal documents. From age 23 on, he was a recorded minister who made 30 or more excursions to various meetings from New England to the Carolinas. Woolman's moral landscape encompassed a firm belief in divine providence – that God directed the destinies of people and nations who trusted Him. Not unlike John Bartram, Woolman had a strong sense that a principle of order and harmony pervaded the universe. He was a faithful witness to the revealed truth of God. He felt an imperative to testify to this truth by what he said and did [Moulton].

In particular, he believed in the equality of all people – especially slaves, and in foregoing of the material wealth resulting from an economic system that rested on the backs of slaves. Not only did he sympathize with slaves but he believed that ownership of slaves dimmed a person's visions and depraved the mind. Woolman did not try to stir up feeling against those in power, rather he aroused the feelings of those very people who held the power to quicken their consciences to ease the plight of slaves [Moulton]. This approach was quite consistent with his own experiences in the world. As, for example, in this story from Part One of his journal.

“Another thing remarkable in my childhood was that once, going to a neighbour's house, I saw on the way a robin sitting on her nest; and as I came near she went off, but having young ones, flew about and with many cries expressed her concern for them. I stood and threw stones at her, till one striking her, she fell down dead. At first I was pleased with the exploit, but after a few minutes was seized with horror, as having a sportive way killed an innocent creature while she was careful for her young. I beheld her lying dead and thought those young ones for which she was so careful must now perish for want of their dam to nourish them; and after some painful considerations on the subject, I climbed up the tree, took all the young birds and killed them, supposing that better than to leave them to pine away and die miserably and believed in this case that Scripture proverb was fulfilled, “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.” I then went on my errand, but for some hours could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed, and was much troubled... Thus, He whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind which incites to exercise goodness toward every living creature.”

This is an example of how Woolman uses natural, often biblical, imagery to convey a moral lesson. In this story he presents himself as a child in relation to a robin and her young. Elsewhere he relates specific incidents involving slaves. But in all of his anecdotes, Woolman's purpose is to describe the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, detail the consequences of this relationship, and offer the possibility of a better way to live.

While the substance of Woolman's beliefs and the history of his witness are well-known to most of the people in this room, a powerful, *contemporary* expression of the same concerns by Lisa Gould is not as well-known. Lisa Gould is an ecologist, a member of Friends Committee on Unity with Nature, and a member of Westerly, Rhode Island Meeting. In 1994, she published an article titled “Friends, Slavery, and the Earth.” Quite intentionally, her words and images echo those of Woolman and bring to bear the same moral landscape on today's environmental crisis.

She writes, “Fox, Penn, and Woolman...all were concerned about the spiritual degradation brought about by wrong relations. Woolman asked Friends to examine every aspect of their lives to root out practices and purchases which utilized slave labor. In a society in which much of the economy was based on slave labor, no longer participating in any aspect of slavery must have been a very difficult decision to live by. But as they ‘came round right’ in relationships, they were freed of the terrible burden of guilt and empowered to positive action and lives of wholeness.”

“God calls Friends today to similar action: we are asked to look into our hearts and examine our relationship with the rest of Creation and to recognize that our neighbor includes the entire Earth community. We are being called to examine our relationship with modern technology to make conscious choices about which technologies enhance our lives and which are superfluous or destructive. We are being asked to develop a new relationship with the land, one based on mutual respect and care rather than exploitation.

"Friends have long rested on the laurels of Quaker participation in emancipation. In looking backwards so proudly, have we forgotten to look ahead at the new relations we are offered?"

The topic and the message of Gould is similar to that of Woolman – there is a wrong relationship in the world and it is incumbent upon Friends, especially, to set it right. The main difference between these 20th century words and those of Woolman in the 18th century is that Gould does not use nature as an analogy. Instead she speaks directly about nature as the full reality. She does not speak in terms of God, but phrases such as “Earth community” and “Creation” have the same moral authority.

It is tempting to say much more about this theme, but we are limited by time. So we will have to be content, for now, with a mere taste!

IV. The fourth and final theme is that of nature from a social/political perspective. *How might we look at our plant from this perspective? Let me give you a hypothetical example. Suppose that, because they grow so quickly and so tall, Norfolk pines are being grown commercially on many Pacific islands. Suppose that these commercial interests have destroyed other native vegetation, and planted acres and acres of solid Norfolk pine, for harvest and sale in the United States. Suppose that indigenous peoples are not allowed to use these forests for their own timber, they don't make any money off of the practice, and environmental degradation is a major problem. Suppose that I stand before you to claim that this is not right and to ask you to join with me to stop Norfolk pine farming!*

In this view, truth is a social order involving equity and justice. Nature is the backdrop, the cast of characters and the stage on which these issues are played out. The language is meant to give witness to injustice, inspire outrage, and excite change in an oppressive social order. Writers expressing this view may appeal to an inner sense of right but their main intent is outward action in the world.

Friends Committee on Unity with Nature or FCUN, founded in 1990, is an outgrowth of Friends long-standing commitment to Peace and Social concerns, with an environmental focus. In 1994, FCUN published a book entitled “Becoming a Friend of Creation” which is a compilation of essays by individual writers, quotations from the Bible, inspirational quotations from many sources, facts, and queries from meetings throughout the United States. This book has examples of all of the kinds of writing we have talked about, but it is predominantly about social change. Very briefly, I would like to read extracts from several different pieces to illustrate my point.

One essay, entitled “By-Laws to the Covenant” by Marshall Massey, member of Mountain View Meeting in Denver, CO is an extract from a longer address given to Friends General Conference in July 1985. Massey is credited with launching modern Quaker efforts to bear a religious witness on environmental issues, including founding Friends Committee on Unity with Nature. In this essay, Massey uses extensive biblical language and images to inspire his listeners to recognize the need for social change with respect to the environment.

He speaks in biblical tones about what God says to us:

“You shall not act in any way which makes the world less able to sustain life;

Not by destroying the soil

Nor by destroying the living sea

Nor by laying waste to wild places,

Nor by releasing poisons,

Nor by causing great changes in the climate...”

And so forth, including the punishments and the “casting down of your house and fields” that will occur if we do not listen to these commandments.

Here, Massey speaks in the strict, Old Testament sense of a prophet urging people to change their ways lest they invoke the wrath and power of God. Nature is the realm of God and the responsibility of humans. By living improperly, humans are threatening the destruction of God's realm including us. Jack Philips, a member of Northern Yearly Meeting, in an essay, entitled “The spiritual dimension – why we care for the earth,” is more specific about the steps that humans need to take to make social change. He writes: “The experience of being ‘in unity with Nature’ isn't mere aesthetic appreciation; it is a profound recognition that humankind and the earth share a common pulse, a common lifeblood, and a common destiny...Can contemplating the earth's wonders motivate and empower us to move from abuse to

protection, from exploitation to earthcare? Can our Inner Light help us discern and speak the truth to corporate/political forces that use deception to mask their plunder?"

Finally, well-known Quaker theologian, Elizabeth Watson, begins her essay entitled "Healing Ourselves and Our Earth," with the heading "Our Mother is Dying!" By this, she means that we are destroying the mother of us all – the Earth. She urges us to look at some basic beliefs that need to be changed, including:

- our dualistic view of reality and
- an outmoded authoritarian concept of God.

Skillfully blending poetry and reflection, she suggests ways in which we might work together to change these beliefs. Healing the Earth, she claims, begins with healing ourselves in body and in spirit. We must do this not only for ourselves but for our children, grandchildren, and future generations.

As you can see, the 3 essays from FCUN use very different approaches, styles, and claims. However they are united in the common purpose of exciting readers to be aware of the great damage that human excesses have inflicted on nature, and to work together to heal them. Their voices are compelling and urgent. The message is that we must organize society to change, NOW.

At this point, let us return to my friendly plant and summarize the four themes I have been discussing.

First, the scientific view of nature exemplified by John Bartram. Just as I can describe the structures, functions and uses of our plant, the scientist sees all of nature as a vast subject for observation, study, and use.

Second, the romantic view, exemplified by William Bartram. Just as I can write a poem about our plant or capture its colors and forms in a painting, the artist sees in nature a landscape of scenic beauty, color and design, inspiring a strong emotional response.

Third, the moral view exemplified by John Woolman and Lisa Gould. Just as our plant illustrates the cooperation that occurs between members of a larger body, the moralist finds a higher authority in nature. This view of the world helps us to understand how to live in right relationship with other humans as well as with the Earth.

Fourth, the social/political view, exemplified by Marshall Massey, Jack Phillips and Elizabeth Watson. Just as relatives of our plant are being misused in parts of the world, nature, in general, is the arena for the call to widespread social change and political organization to head off the apocalypse of environmental destruction.

Now, what did I learn from my study of these emergent themes? It was surprising to me to find no clear chronological order or development over the 300 years considered. Scientific descriptions of the kind that occur in John Bartram's writings also occur in present-day works of Friends, such as Steve Curwood whose radio show called "Living on Earth" is all about environmental science or in Calvin Schwabe's Pendle Hill pamphlet on Quakers and Science. Likewise, the cries for social change, so dominant in the words of Friends in Unity with Nature, are not far from those of John Woolman 250 years earlier. The form may vary according to the language and customs of the times or the occupations of the writers. But the themes seem to be enduring rather than evolving.

What, then, characterizes these approaches to nature as Quaker? It seems to me that each writer, in his or her own way uses nature to provide witness to one or more of the most long-standing and powerful cores of Quaker belief - the testimonies.

For example, elements of the fundamental testimony of integrity are common among all of the writers we have discussed. By integrity I mean the sense of Truth that guides right behavior. For John Bartram there is integrity in observing nature and for William Bartram in painting it. For Elizabeth Watson, there is integrity in healing the earth by healing ourselves in body and in spirit. For all of these writers, that sense of Truth is revealed through Nature in one way or another.

Beyond integrity, there is less unity and more diversity in the expressions of other testimonies. For example, there are elements of the testimony of simplicity (such as plain living, and a focus on the spiritual essence of things) in several of the writers. John Bartram refers to himself as "a simple plowman;" John Woolman constantly challenges us to divest ourselves of material possessions. And, Marshall Massey is concerned about the pollution that results from the excesses of industry. In contrast, witness to simplicity is less clear in the writings of William Bartram whose style tended to be elaborate and ornamented.

However, the testimony of equality (or the belief of “that of God” in all people) is strong in William Bartram who refers to “the divine intelligence [of the Creator] diffused through every part of his works, which directs and rules all.” Likewise, John Woolman recognizes slaves as equals and, at a later time period, Lisa Gould recognizes all creatures as equals. Equality is not as evident in John Bartram who owned slaves and organized his world in terms of natural hierarchies.

Finally, the testimony of justice (the fair, nonviolent treatment of all people or beings) is the dominant theme in the works of the writers from Friends Committee on Unity with Nature, all of whom implore us to take action in the world. In contrast, we do not find this testimony in the works of either of the Bartrams.

This diversity of witness should come as no surprise to those gathered in this room. Each of us makes different choices about how to focus our talents, efforts and resources. Like many of you, I have made different choices at different times in my life. As a young woman in my teens and early 20s I did quite a bit of inspired drawing, painting and writing of poetry, (some of which was in a very bad though sincere romantic style). Later, I acquired scientific training and focused outwardly, on empirical research. More recently, I have struggled with the inward search for moral authority. And I expect that, once my daughter leaves the nest, I will spend more time in outward witness for social justice.

Perhaps, then, we could say that Truth, like nature, has different faces.

- When the **individual** looks inward, he or she experiences Truth or God directly, as inspiration, joy and love.

- When the **individual** looks outward, he or she finds Truth in natural simplicity.

- When a **group**, such as a Quaker meeting, looks inward, it sees Truth as equality, or morality.

- And when a **group**, such as a Quaker meeting, looks outward, it finds Truth in justice.

There is no need to try to make one type of truth or discovery of it “better” than the others because each perspective informs different aspects of the human experience, both individually and collectively [ideas adapted from Ken Wilbur].

In conclusion, we might say that each of the Quaker writers we have examined is a seeker who strives to know Truth through nature. Whether expressed in terms of a scientific, romantic, moral or social perspective, each has a deep abiding love of nature. The richness of all of them taken together offers us a multifaceted view of nature that is really more satisfying in its complexity than any single view.

Thank you!