

The Natural World as Image

I've always felt a positive emotional response to the word and concept of "natural." As a teenager, I was deeply inspired by Dick Gregory; based on his book, *Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat*, I radically changed my diet. Both Gregory and the consumer advocate, Ralph Nader, sang my song, and I readily embraced their passion for consuming those things which are natural and of high quality. I was determined not to be lazy in my thinking about food or most any other product I consumed.

I have ever since equated natural with "better" or "best" because the word means that something has come from a substance not unlike my own composition. Whether made by human hands or derived from nature – the very idea that "natural" in some way represents the human connection to the natural world has been a source of great comfort for me. Until recently.

While on my routine morning walk a few weeks ago, I was (as usual) admiring the brilliance and intensity of the sun, when I experienced an epiphany that the stars – indeed, the entire natural world – present an image, or metaphor, or allegory for a life beyond the reach of our physical senses, critical thinking, or imagination. What we will ever be able to comprehend with all our compassion and reason and with even the most sensitive of equipment and advanced technology is not true life; rather, it's an invitation.

The beauty and complexities of our natural world inspire wonder; the human mind and soul engage in the awesome work of calculation, visioning, and sensual exploration. Yet, these incredible endeavors are, by nature, imperfect. And this is what came to me while I was walking: that the glorious sun and everything else that we can physically sense or imagine – is an illustration or product of perfection,

but not perfection itself. Just as I prefer eating homegrown garden veggies to plastic fruit table decorations, I desire to know – not simply to know about, but to *perceive, recognize, intimately comprehend, and consume* – that which is perfect, as recorded by one of Jesus Christ’s disciples: “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5)

That which is spiritually perfect is not an extension of the naturally imperfect, just as I am not an extension of a photo taken of me. While a photo allows others to see one’s physical features, and perhaps even the kindness in one’s eyes, it does not reveal their innermost thoughts or details about their upbringing and aspirations. A photo of me cannot tell you what I ate for breakfast or that I want to learn to speak Mandarin. *Any* representation of me – audio, video, clone – is not me.

I no longer perceive our natural world as equivalent to God, nor is God an extension of it. Like any deeply intriguing photo invites us to know more about its subject and context, nature and our human experience are constantly beckoning us to know and experience God, who is incomparably profound.

Our human-made systems and laws reflect, rather than resolve our imperfection – our egos, personal agendas, greed, and tendency to hold only disdain for our enemies. While I may devote my energy to easing, in some way, human suffering, my hope – the ultimate significance that I attach to life – no longer rests in the “better instincts” of flawed humanity, nor in my connection to an imperfect natural world. My hope rests in the non-natural, spiritual, perfect Life that is God, as revealed by Jesus Christ.

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