

Source: "The Higher Peaks," in *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* By Donald Worster, Oxford, 2008, passages between p. 207 and 215

All the same, he [John Muir] was never comfortable with any implication, whether made by reputable scientists like Darwin or charlatans like Gunning, that nature was characteristically bloody or ruthless in its methods. Victorians were often apt to read the facts falsely, to Muir's mind besmirching the essential goodness he found all around him. Alfred Tennyson's sinister line, "Nature, red in tooth and claw," from the poem *In Memoriam*, had crept even into Darwin's understanding of evolutionary processes. Such false reading distorted the truth and made nature into a mirror image of mankind's often selfish, violent, and competitive behavior. In one of his early field journals Muir admitted that the alpine plants he saw fighting to survive against extremes of cold and wind might seem like "the pinched blinking dwarfs which almost justify Darwin's ungodly word struggle." But just as he had survived those altitudes, and even flourished there, so they were surviving and flourishing. So all manner of living things were thriving, finding secure homes in the most challenging places, and adding to the harmony and beauty of the earth.

Perhaps Jeanne Carr was right that circumstances had been so kind and gentle for Muir that he had lost any capacity to feel the terrors that haunted so many of his contemporaries. Yet he had passed through his share of dark nights of the soul. He had often gone hungry, skimping by on a meager diet of bread and tea, had endured bone-chilling nights and rough accommodations, and on more than one occasion in California had nearly lost his life. Over and over he had tested nature's benevolence, and always he had come away reassured that there was nothing truly or deeply hostile to him or anyone else in the universe. "I never saw one drop of blood, one red stain, on all this wilderness. Even death is in harmony here." Those who found tragedy in the workings of nature had lost any sense of fitness or any instinct for survival. Fearing bogeymen and disasters lurking in the wilderness, they had found them. For those who had overcome such irrational fear, however, the terror and gloom disappeared (as Muir had discovered even in mosquito and alligator-infested Florida).

That species were the product of natural evolution, not direct

supernatural creation, was a science he could live with, and even find uplifting, for it bonded him to all other creatures. What he could not accept was a gloomy interpretation of nature or nature's laws. Evolution need not undermine faith or hope. Just as the glaciers had produced fertile soil and a richness of life, so evolution worked to produce a more productive and more beautiful home for all creatures.

Ultimately, beauty more than productivity was the basis of Muir's faith. The natural world was so utterly, inexpressibly beautiful that it must be the result of an underlying principle of divine goodness – call it God or call it something else. His thesaurus offered many synonyms. Beauty, however, was the most common word he substituted for God. On an excursion down the Tuolumne Canyon he scribbled, "Beauty is God, what shall we say of God that we may not say of Beauty." Despite a thorough absorption of Darwinian science, he continued to feel a surge of piety whenever he rambled in the wild outdoors, whether far above timberline, or in low forests, or on the desert. All was beauty. All was God.

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Was Muir a Transcendentalist? The great oracle of that philosophy in the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson, included Muir as "one of my men" in a list of nearly twenty names entered in his journal of 1871. Subsequently, many have followed that designation, sometimes even reducing the core list of great Transcendentalists to a bare threesome: Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir – all poets of nature seeing with a common eye. The difficulty in that labeling is that it ignores all the other influences, scientific and cultural, that made Muir what he was well before he sat down to read thoroughly the New England philosophers.

Muir grew out of the soil of Protestant Christianity, but also out of Robert Burns's revolutionary democracy, Wordsworth's piety that pervaded North British culture, and natural science's approach to truth. Emerson came out of rather different soil. He was the child of Unitarian Boston, which emphasized human significance, and of Harvard and its classical education; moreover, he had no scientific training. Thoreau comes closer to the mindset of Muir; they rejected bourgeois society, needed solitude, felt a visceral love of material nature, and inherited a mechanical and scientific aptitude. But Thoreau was a prickly sort of man who found friendship difficult, whereas Muir was an intensely social being who made friends easily and kept them for life. There were many

similarities among the three, but there were also telling differences.

Transcendentalism was, to be sure, more than a New England invention. That movement began with nineteenth-century German idealists (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and others), the poetry of England's Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the essays of Scotland's Thomas Carlyle, all inspirational for the Massachusetts poet and seer Emerson and his disciple Thoreau. Transcendentalists were a radically individualistic lot, but they shared a conviction that the world is constituted of both matter and mind, each reflecting the other in perfect correspondence. They also were convinced that mind "transcends" matter and is more powerful and important. Mind created matter, not the other way around. To be sure, they welcomed science and conceded that any modern system of thought must never posit any beliefs that contradict scientific evidence. But ultimately for every transcendentalist it was the poet or artist, not the scientist, who could perceive the mind dwelling behind nature. Poets alone had the vision required to penetrate the material veil. A poet lurked in every human being, said Emerson, but some men were great poets and others were not. . . .

Soon, with Woolson's gifts in his possession, he began sounding more and more like Thoreau the campaigner for self-liberation. "I have yet to see the man who has caught the rhythm of the big slow pulse beats of Nature," he wrote in one journal. In another entry he declared, "Our forefathers have forged chains of duty and habit which bind us notwithstanding our boasted freedom, & we ourselves add link to link." "How hard to pull or shake people out of town. Earthquakes cannot do it nor even plagues. These only cause the civilized to pray and ring bells and cower in corners of bedrooms and churches." "How infinitely superior to our physical sense are those of the mind ... Imagination usually regarded as synonym for unreal. Yet this is true imagination healthful and real—less likely to mislead than the coarser senses." "Talk of immortality. After a whole day in the woods we are already immortal. When is the end of such a day?" The cadence and substance in those aphorisms would have sounded familiar around Walden Pond.

If Transcendentalism is reduced to be the proposition that self-reliance is the key to personal development or that mind creates and pervades the natural order, then Muir was one with Emerson and Thoreau. So too were other naturalists, and so too were plenty of non-scientists. Transcendentalism, pantheism, and related ideas were all in

the air, asserting the unity of spirit and matter and each claiming that it offered the best marriage of science and the imagination. To borrow a metaphor from evolutionary biology, the intellectual landscape of Britain and America in the nineteenth century was scattered with species, near-species, and assorted varieties of a common transcendentalist or pantheistic genus. They dispersed from common points of origin into all manner of habitats, or they sprang up on their own, responding to independent but converging pressures to bring new spiritual ideas into being, ideas compatible with natural science. It was not only an age of science but also an age of proliferating nature-based religions and philosophies.

Muir was one of those independent varieties of a widespread species, nourished by a distinctive cultural soil and flourishing in the unique California habitat. He was no clone of a New England philosophical movement. Instead, he should be catalogued as that hitherto unknown species *Pantheism muirii* var. *sierra*. A fair description of key beliefs that had emerged by his mid to late thirties would include the following: behind the beautiful material face of nature breathes a world-controlling power called "God," "Beauty," or "Love." Humankind is out of synchrony with that power – an alienation that must be healed by direct experience of wild, natural beauty. Humans are not naturally corrupt or fallen but only strayed away from the true source of happiness and virtue. Science was his mode of reestablishing contact with the world spirit. With its assistance, "I will fuse in spirit skies ... I will touch naked God."

Once this peculiar seed had found its mountain niche, it would not be uprooted and transplanted to someone else's soil. Muir resisted all pressure to go to Boston to further his intellectual development. Such advice came from President Runkle, who urged his guide to come away with him to study science professionally at MIT. He thinks that if the damp mosses and lichens were scraped off I might make a teacher - a professor ... to burn beneath their technological furnaces." Muir wrote Jeanne. "All in kindness but I'd rather grow green in the sky."