

Selections Pertaining to Rachel Carson's Nature Religion

The text that follows represents one of the most forthcoming expressions of Rachel Carson's spirituality available in print. It is from "The real world around us," an address she presented in 1954 to nearly 1000 women journalists, and finally published in *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*. Ed. Linda Lear. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 148-163. The following selection constitutes its concluding pages (159-63). Note the expansive love of nature and the mysteries of the cosmos. This passage also shows how her passionate love for life and its mysteries is the underpinnings for her engagement as an environmental activist, for it ends with a call to action. Also of special interest is her early claim about the superior moral intuition of women, which would be echoed later by at least some of those who would be come known as "ecofeminists"

From¹ what I have told you, you will know that a large part of my life has been concerned with some of the beauties and mysteries of this earth about us, and with the even greater mysteries of the life that inhabits it. No one can dwell long among such subjects without thinking rather deep thoughts, without asking himself searching and often unanswerable questions, and without achieving a certain philosophy.

There is one quality that characterizes all of us who deal with the sciences of the earth and its life – we are never bored. We can't be. There is always something new to be investigated. Every mystery solved brings us to the threshold of a greater one.

I like to remember the wonderful old Swedish oceanographer, Otto Petterson. He died a few years ago at the age of 93, in full possession of his keen mental powers. His son, also a distinguished oceanographer, tells us in a recent book how intensely his father enjoyed every new experience, every new discovery² concerning the world about him. "He was an incurable romantic," the son wrote, "intensely in love with life and with the mysteries of the Cosmos which, he was firmly convinced, he had been born to unravel." When, past 90, Otto Petterson realized he had not much longer to enjoy the earthly scene, he said to his son: "What will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow."

The pleasures, the values of contact with the natural world, are not reserved for the scientists. They are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of a lonely mountain top – or the sea – or the stillness of a forest; or who will stop to think about so small a thing as the mystery of a growing seed.

I am not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I stand here tonight and tell you that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth.

¹ {p. 159f}

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I believe this affinity of the human spirit for the earth and its beauties is deeply and logically rooted. As human beings, we are part of the whole stream of life. We have been human beings for perhaps a million years. But life itself – passes on something of itself to other life – that mysterious entity that moves and is aware of itself and its surroundings, and so is distinguished from rocks or senseless clay – [from which] life arose many hundreds of millions of years ago. Since then it has developed, struggled, adapted itself to its surroundings, evolved an infinite number of forms. But its living protoplasm is built of the same elements as air, water, and rock. To these the mysterious spark of life was added. Our origins are of the earth. And so there is in us a deeply seated response to the natural universe, which is part of our humanity.³

Now why do I introduce such a subject tonight – a serious subject for a night when we are supposed to be having fun? First, because you have asked me to tell you something of myself – and I can't do that without telling you some of the things I believe in so intensely.

Also, I mention it because it is not often I have a chance to talk to a thousand women. I believe it is important for women to realize that the world of today threatens to destroy much of that beauty that has immense power to bring us a healing release from tension. Women have a greater intuitive understanding of such things. They want for their children not only physical health but mental and spiritual health as well. I bring these things to your attention tonight because I think your awareness of them will help, whether you are practicing journalists, or teachers, or librarians, or housewives and mothers.

What are these threats of which I speak? What is this destruction of beauty – this substitution of man-made ugliness – this trend toward a perilously artificial world? Unfortunately, that is a subject that could require a whole conference, extending over many days. So in the few minutes that I have to devote to it, I can only suggest the trend.

We see it in small ways in our own communities, and in larger ways in the community of the state of the nation. We see the destruction of beauty and the suppression of human individuality in hundreds of suburban real estate developments where the first act is to cut down all the trees and the next is to build an infinitude of little houses, each like its neighbor.

We see it in distressing form in the nation's capital, where I live. There in the heart of the city we have a small but beautiful woodland area – Rock Creek Park. It is a place where one can go, away from the noise of traffic and of man-made confusions, for a little interval of refreshing and restoring quiet – where one can hear the soft water sounds of a stream on its way to river and⁴ sea, where the wind flows through the trees, and a veery (sic) sings in the green twilight. Now they propose to run a six-lane arterial highway through the heart of that narrow woodland valley – destroying forever its true and immeasurable value to the city and the nation.

Those who place so great a value on a highway apparently do not think the thoughts of an editorial writer for the *New York Times* who said: “But a little lonesome space, where nature has her own way, where it is quiet enough at night to hear the patter

³ {page break to 161f}

⁴ {p. 162f}

of small paws on leaves and the murmuring of birds, can still be afforded. The gift of tranquillity (sic), wherever found, is beyond price.”

We see the destructive trend on a national scale in proposals to invade the national parks with commercial schemes such as the building of power dams. The parks were placed in trust for all the people, to preserve for them just such recreational and spiritual values as I have mentioned. Is it the right of this, our generation, in its selfish materialism, to destroy these things because we are blinded by the dollar sign? Beauty – and all the values that derive from beauty – are not measured and evaluated in terms of the dollar.

Years ago I discovered in the writings of the British naturalist Richard Jefferies a few lines that so impressed themselves upon my mind that I have never forgotten them. May I quote them for you now?

The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendor of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live. All else is illusion, or mere endurance.

Those lines are, in a way, a statement of the creed I have lived by, for, as perhaps you have seen tonight, a preoccupation with⁵ the wonder and beauty of the earth has strongly influenced the course of my life.

Since *The Sea Around Us* was published, I have had the privilege of receiving many letters from people who, like myself, have been steadied and reassured by contemplating the long history of the earth and sea, and the deeper meanings of the world of nature. These letters have come from all sorts of people. There have been hairdressers and fishermen and musicians; there have been classical scholars and scientists. So many of them have said, in one phrasing or another: “We have been troubled about the world, and had almost lost faith in man; it helps to think about the long history of the earth, and of how life came to be. And when we think in terms of millions of years, we are not so impatient that our own problems be solved tomorrow.”

In contemplating “the exceeding beauty of the earth” these people have found calmness and courage. For there is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of birds; in the ebb and flow of the tides; in the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in these repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.

Mankind has gone very far into an artificial world of his own creation. He has sought to insulate himself, with steel and concrete, from the realities of earth and water. Perhaps he is intoxicated with his own power, as he goes farther and farther into experiments for the destruction of himself and his world. For this unhappy trend there is no single remedy – no panacea. But I believe that the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.

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Equally revealing in its own way is a 1942 memo from Carson to a person in the marketing department of the publisher of her first book, *Under the sea wind* (1941). It provides a revealing window into Carson's biocentric motive and arguably, reveals a kind of animistic imagination akin to Loren Eiseley's. This memo was published in *Lost Woods: the discovered writing of Rachel Carson* (edited by Linda Lear), in "Memo to Mrs. Eales on Under the Sea-Wind" pp. 54-75.

*General Plan and Viewpoint of Book*⁶

I believe that most popular books about the ocean are written from the viewpoint of a human observer – usually a deep sea diver or sometimes a fisherman – and record his impressions and interpretations of what he saw. I was determined to avoid this human bias as much as possible. The ocean is too big and vast and its forces are too mighty to be much affected by human activity.⁷ So I decided that the author as a person or a human observer should never enter the story, but that it should be told as⁸ a simple narrative of the lives of certain animals of the sea. As far as possible, I wanted my readers to feel that they were, for a time, actually living the lives of sea creatures. To bring this about I had first, of course, to think myself into the role of an animal that lives in the sea. I had to forget a lot of human conceptions. For example, time measured by the clock means nothing to a shorebird. His measure of time is not an hour, but the rise and fall of the tides – exposing his food supply or covering it again. Again, light and dark may mean merely the difference between the time when you are relatively safe and the time when an enemy can find you easily. All these adjustments in my thinking had to be made; and in writing the book I was successively a sandpiper, a crab, a mackerel, an eel, and half a dozen other animals. Hardest of all, I had to get the feel of a world that was entirely water.

I very soon realized that the central character of the book was the ocean itself. The smell of the sea's edge, the feeling of vast movements of water, the sound of waves, crept into every page, and over all was the ocean as the force dominating all its creatures.

In order to give a fairly complete picture of sea life, I divided the book into three parts, one to picture the life of the shore, one for the open sea, and one for the deep abyss. In each of these parts, or books, I told the life story of one particular animal.⁹

Also recommended: "Undersea" (written in 1935 and published originally in *Atlantic Monthly*), republished in *Lost Woods: the discovered writing of Rachel Carson*, pp. 3-11.

⁶ {This section begins on p. 55}

⁷ Soon she would modify this view, as she became concerned about the dumping of nuclear material in the oceans.

⁸ {p. 56f}

⁹ The text continues as she explains in more details how this unfolded in the three parts of the book.