



Pantheist Vision

VOL. 37, NO. 1

UNIVERSAL PANTHEIST SOCIETY JOURNAL

SPRING 2020

Earth Day and the Power, and Sacredness, of Nature

by Margie Ann Gibson

On April 22, 1970, twenty million Americans in schools and colleges across the country rallied to raise public awareness of the need to protect our planet in the first Earth Day. Today, the biggest threat to Nature – including ourselves – is climate change, resulting primarily from the burning of fossil fuels. The theme for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day is climate action.

Earth Day was founded by Senator Gaylord Nelson after seeing the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969. Denis Hayes coordinated national activities on college campuses and later founded the Earth Day Network. Their goal was to channel the energy of the anti-war movement into environmental protection. Earth Day is now celebrated in 190 nations.

Americans were rightly alarmed about how we were damaging our planet and our impacts on other species. Changing public consciousness led to landmark legislation; the Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts. Today, all of the legislation to protect our planet is under attack, fueled by fear – loss of jobs, terrorism, and so on – and greed.

To really protect our planet, we need something stronger than fear; we need to foster love and reverence for the Earth and all the life it sustains. We need to embrace the sacredness of Nature.

Reversing climate change is a massive challenge, but what have we learned from the first Earth Day? What can we do?

Last fall, a short film, “Nature Now,” was released featuring young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg and British writer George Monbiot. They have a compelling message – leave fossil fuels in the ground and let Nature help heal our broken climate. Living ecosystems like forests, wetlands, and seabeds remove enormous quantities of carbon from the air. They’re a “natural climate solution.” These activists promote protecting existing ecosystems, restoring damaged ones, and funding things that help Nature instead of funding things that destroy it – such as fossil fuel subsidies.

But their straightforward message – *protect, restore, fund* – has one critical missing component – *revere*. If we don’t change our attitudes about Nature, we’ll always be fighting a negative battle based on fear and greed. Instead, we need to embrace the positive: love, respect and reverence for Nature. There we can also find inspiration to turn things around.

A revised “Nature Now” is achievable. Protecting existing ecosystems and funding efforts that help Nature are a matter of advocacy: spreading these ideas and making your voice heard, including by voting for people who support Nature.

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Earth Day and the Power, and Sacredness, of Nature *continued*

Given the incredible amount of damage humans have done to ecosystems, the difficulty of restoration may seem daunting, but the resilience of Nature, with our help, is inspiring. Here are some examples of successful restoration:

In 2011, removal of two dams began on the Elwha River in Olympic National Park in Washington state – the world's largest dam-removal project. It came about largely through the persistence of the Lower Elwha Klamath Tribe with help from conservationists. The dams altered the course of the river and destroyed the salmon fishery. After their removal, native plants, with help from humans and Nature, revegetated the former lake beds behind the dams. The ecosystem began to heal, and salmon returned upstream of the dams just months after dam removal, after being blocked for almost a century.

Another example is the restoration efforts in the Redwoods. For decades, logging interests prevented the establishment of a national park. Over 100 years ago, concerned citizens formed the Save The Redwoods League and started buying Redwood forest acreage, as well as supporting the creation of California State Parks to protect them. In 1968, a national park was finally established in some of the remaining uncut forest, and in 1978, logged over parts of Redwood Creek were added to it.

Logging created stripped hillsides of trees, and created unstable slopes with a vast road network, leading to erosion and landslides. Sediment in streams damaged habitat, and some species, like Coho salmon, could no longer survive. Restoration involves removing roads and restoring natural contours. As vegetation returns, streams begin recovering. It is dramatic – and encouraging – seeing the results of restoration begun in the 1990s, with positive results seen as quickly as five years, and the work continues today.



Gray Wolf courtesy National Park Service

A different type of restoration was the 1995 reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park, which has already established vast positive ecological ripple effects beyond what anyone envisaged at the time. Heavy winter browsing of willow, aspen, and cottonwood by elk populations damaged riparian habitat. Returning wolves to the natural predator population kept elk moving. As willow stands along streams recovered, beavers returned, creating a cascade of habitat restoration that benefitted fish and songbirds. Additionally, wolf kills benefit scavengers, including ravens, wolverines, bears, and beetles. The restoration of the complex Yellowstone ecosystem is still ongoing.

We can act to *protect, restore* and *fund*. But our success in long-term protection of our planet also depends on changing attitudes. The sacredness of Nature is supported not only by a growing number of Pantheist organizations, but also by a broad cross-section of Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and other spiritual traditions.

I remember that first Earth Day, and in the following years, my growing awareness of the human actions harming our world. But at the same time as I became an activist, I experienced a growing spiritual mindfulness; that Nature is sacred. I need my political activism to be balanced with the joy I find in the song of a bird, or the awe I feel walking among majestic Redwoods or hearing the howl of a wolf. We all need love, respect, and inspiration in our lives rather than fear.

Together, we can take the actions advocated in “Nature Now” – *protect, restore, fund* – a reality. But we must add one more essential component – *revere*. You and I can make a difference.



Margie Gibson is the President of the Universal Pantheist Society and a long-time conservationist.

THE EVERYDAY PANTHEIST

Rediscovering William Wordsworth

by Sharon Wells

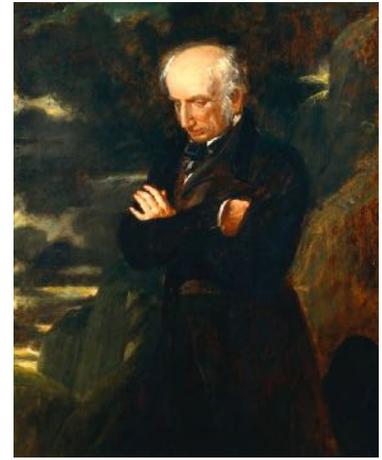
William Wordsworth, an English Romantic and Pantheistic poet, was born April 7, 1770, and died April 23, 1850. Near the end of his life he became England's poet laureate. His poems, three that I remember from my school days, resonate with many experiences of my own life. It seems to me that's what poetry is all about, to make us feel something.

Wordsworth was the second of five children. He was closest to his sister, Dorothy, also a poet, his companion as well as later his scribe. He attended grammar school in England's beautiful mountainous Lake District where his love of Nature seems to have been born and nurtured, then went on to earn a degree from Cambridge University. During those college years, he took a summer walking tour of France, becoming a Republican sympathizer after the fall of the Bastille, and after graduation, returned to France, meeting Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, though he didn't actually meet his child for nine years. He then went on to marry an old English friend, Mary Hutchinson, and they had their own large family of five children.

Wordsworth went through dark periods in his life, becoming almost penniless at one point, but eventually he was reunited with his sister, with whom he lived until his death, and also met poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The two of them developed a close friendship and poetic partnership, which led to *Lyrical Ballads*, an important volume essentially launching the Romantic period of poetry in general and specifically transforming Wordsworth's writing of long, dark, more socially activist-type poetry to those Nature poems and other ballads many of us are more familiar with today. His long autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, which is considered his masterpiece, was eventually published by his wife, Mary, after his death.

Wordsworth's poetry also reflect the periods of isolation, loss, and the loneliness he intermittently went through; what it meant to be human. These included his strained friendship with Coleridge, the drowning of one of his brothers, and the deaths of three of his children.

Yet, one cannot think of Wordsworth without thinking of Nature, one of the major themes of his poems, and the pleasure he found outdoors. The joy and peace Nature gave him greatly impacted his spirituality. His nature poem, *I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud* (also known as *Daffodils* - see next page) may not necessarily have always been critically acclaimed, but nevertheless, it is probably his most well-known poem, and certainly possesses a Pantheistic flavor. It also displays another common theme of Wordsworth's poetry; *memory*. He reminds us of the hopeful and healing power Nature brings through remembering such sights as that field of daffodils even when we're far removed from them. It's especially meaningful to me because I had my own experience with a field of daffodils (or jonquils as I call them) years ago that I've never forgotten and that periodically comes to my mind's eye, bringing me great pleasure. Originally written in 1804, the version shared here was revised by Wordsworth himself in 1815.



Portrait of William Wordsworth by Benjamin Robert Haydon, National Portrait Gallery, courtesy Wikimedia.

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Rediscovering William Wordsworth *continued from page 3*

Another theme in Wordsworth's poetry centers around spirituality and immortality. *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* resonated with me when I was a teenager, years before I embraced Pantheism, during a time I was beginning to struggle with my own spirituality. Wordsworth addresses the sense of loss (or maybe its distance or detachment that we experience as we age) of the pure joy and excitement of being alive we feel as children, that closeness to our home, the place we come from, that tends to dim as we grow farther in time from it.

Yet, Nature has a way of sparking that remembrance of our roots, of our childhood enthusiasm and the curiosity with which we embraced life, "trailing clouds of glory...from God, who is our home: Heaven lies about

us in our infancy!" Since I was a child, I've had brief but intense flashes of pure joy and connection that are unexplainable; I want to hold onto them longer, but I can't. It's like a memory I'm "feeling" instead of remembering in my mind, and they have happened less frequently as I've aged.

I also think back to what Christmas and other holidays were like then, how it was to play outside all day in the summer, the eagerness to feel sunshine on bare legs, to walk without shoes through the grass. It came effortlessly, almost magically, life bathed in a kind of shiny newness around every corner. "*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, the earth, and every common sight, to me did seem appareled in celestial light.*" Is it inevitable that this "celestial light" must disappear and give way to sadness and sense of loss as we grow older? Although sometimes it seems I have to work harder to experience it, it still does appear, like this morning, when looking out the kitchen window, I saw a bright red cardinal sitting in the pear tree. For that minute, I felt the contentment Nature gives us that Wordsworth knew and felt, too. And how often nowadays do we hear that we're stardust?

Intellectually, I know that: but inwardly I believe it, too, when I look up at the sky full of stars; it's a feeling of looking homeward, where I came from, where I'm going to; not necessarily God in the traditional sense, but God nonetheless to me.

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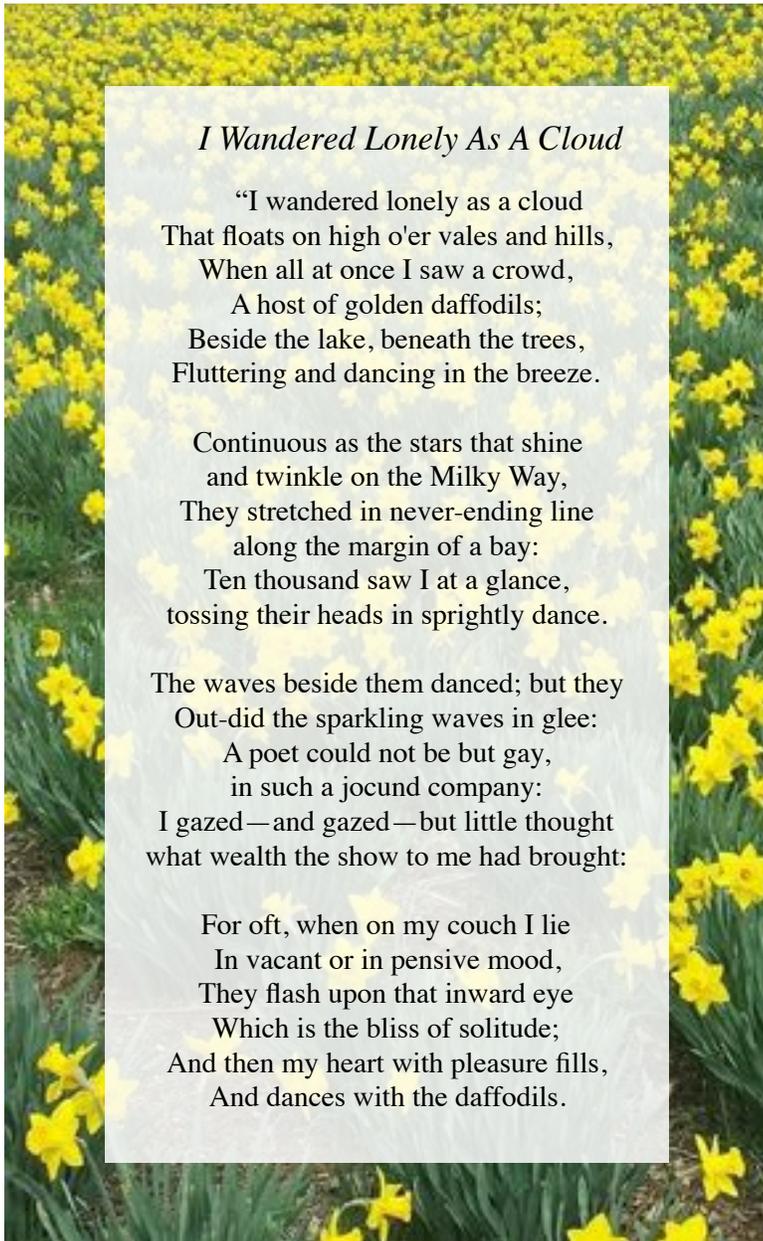


Photo by Sharon Wells

Rediscovering William Wordsworth

Excerpts from
“*Ode on Intimations of Immortality*”
“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Appareled in celestial light ...

—But there’s a Tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have look’d upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream? ...

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind ...

“Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

Pantheists differ on the matters of soul, the afterlife, the “before life” that Wordsworth speaks of here, and heaven. Some Pantheists believe in a “soul” separate from the body and the brain that lived before our physical birth and continues to exist after our body has turned to dust; others find more appealing the belief in a collective universal consciousness we will join when we die; yet I would venture that most Pantheists look at the afterlife in more material and scientific terms, elements scattered, alive only in the memories of others, things we have done in our lives, children we have had. Words like *God* and *soul* and *heaven* can be interpreted in different ways, yet giving each of us a kind of spiritual satisfaction and comfort. If one believes that God is Nature, then still we can agree with Wordsworth that God is, indeed, “home,” our beginning and our end, and at the end of this physical life, we will still be a part of the Universe in one form or another, be it as an identifiable soul or dust nurturing other life forms. That is immortality.

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Pantheist Vision

(ISSN 0742-5368) is a quarterly publication of the Universal Pantheist Society, P.O. Box 3499, Visalia, CA 93278.

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network.pantheist.net.

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Pantheists are persons who derive their fundamental religious experience through their personal relationship with the Universe. They feel that Nature is the ultimate context for human existence, and seek to improve their relationship with the natural world as their fundamental religious responsibility.

Religion for Pantheists is a system of reverent behavior toward the Earth rather than subscription to a particular creed. Because Pantheists identify God with Nature rather than an anthropomorphic being, Pantheists oppose the arrogant world-view of anthropocentrism.

The Universal Pantheist Society is a non-profit religious corporation, founded in 1975. The purposes of the Society are: "to unite Pantheists everywhere into a common fellowship, to spread information about Pantheism to the public, to facilitate discussion and communication among Pantheists, to provide for the mutual aid and defense of Pantheists everywhere, to stimulate a revision of social attitudes away from anthropocentrism and toward reverence for the Earth and a vision of Nature as the ultimate context for human existence, and to take appropriate action toward the protection and restoration of the Earth."

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Rediscovering William Wordsworth *continued from page 5*

Wordsworth has been called a Pantheist by some, a Christian Pantheist, and a humanist. He was described as “at least a semi-atheist” by his friend Coleridge in a May 13, 1796 letter to the atheist John Thelwall” (*The Christian Wordsworth* by William Ulmer), yet it seems he never completely turned his back on the more traditional Christian upbringing of his childhood. “Wordsworth's youthful political radicalism, unlike Coleridge's, never led him to rebel against his religious upbringing. He remarked in 1812 that he was willing to shed his blood for the established Church of England, reflected in his *Ecclesiastical Sketches* of 1822. This religious conservatism also colors *The Excursion*” (Wikipedia). So, even though I can't say definitively he was a Pantheist in the sense of identifying God with Nature, he certainly seemed to experience the presence of God most strongly in Nature, writing about it in a way that appeals to many Pantheists, inspiring us and reminding us of what we love about Nature, making us want to claim him as one of our own.

Does the label really matter? What seems important is his perception of and passion and reverence for Nature, and its importance throughout all his life, seeing it through a poet's eyes, simple things really that he shares with each of us so eloquently. No matter our age, the world is - or still can be - that exciting place full of mystery and beauty, bathed in the light of the universe, and we can make the spiritual interpretations for ourselves. Whether or not we ever put words to paper or rhyme, we, too, can walk among mountains and trees, gazing upon birds, flowers, and streams through the eyes of a poet, knowing we are home, always. We live in Nature, but Nature also lives in us, in all things, deep in our very cells, ever alive in our memory, and therein lies respite from sadness and loss, therein lies hope. It doesn't get much more Pantheistic than that.



Universal Pantheist Society board member Sharon Wells manages our Facebook Group and also writes our online blog at: <https://www.pantheist.net/blog>

Excerpt from
Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798

“... For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.”

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Pantheist Celebrations for Spring

March

14 Saturday Albert Einstein Day

Albert Einstein, born on this day in 1879, was a renowned physicist with Pantheistic awareness; “Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

19 Thursday Spring Equinox

Celebrate the return of light in the Northern Hemisphere by getting out and enjoying Nature, flying a kite, bringing some flowers in, or planting some native plants.

April

7 Tuesday William Wordsworth Day (story on page 3)

18 Saturday to 26 National Park Week

Celebrate “American’s Best Idea” – our national parks – this week. Admire the beauty in a park near you, or make plans to volunteer in one by joining a restoration effort. On Saturday, April 18, entrance fees are waived at all national parks.

21 Thursday John Muir Day

Born this day in 1838, Muir was an outstanding conservationist, naturalist, and writer who promoted a Pantheistic mysticism with Nature.

22 Wednesday Earth Day 50th Anniversary (story on front page)

Learn more at <https://www.earthday.org>.

25 Saturday Save the Frogs Day

Of the over 4,800 known species of frogs, about one-third are threatened with extinction. This is a day to learn more about amphibians and what conservation actions can help them survive.

May

15 Friday Bike to Work Day

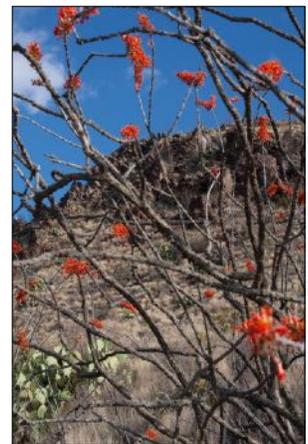
Cycle to work or to run errands; it’s good for your health and the environment. As one of the best ways to get off our addiction to fossil fuels, bicycles are a positive solution to climate change, traffic congestion, and road rage.

20 Wednesday World Bee Day

The United Nations proclaimed May 20 as World Bee Day in 2017. Bees are one of our major pollinators, sustaining food crops and biodiversity. One third of the food we eat is pollinated by bees, and many species of bees are declining worldwide. Planting even small spaces, like balconies, with wildflowers can help save bees or help plant public spaces such as along roadways or in your local park.

27 Wednesday Rachel Carson Day

Born this day in 1907, Carson was a marine biologist and fine Nature writer. She is most famous for her book *Silent Spring*, which warned of the hazards of chemical pesticides such as DDT. Its publication helped launch the modern-day environmental movement.



Ocotillo in bloom, Big Bend National Park © Margie Ann Gibson

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Moose calf © Margie Ann Gibson

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*We seek renewed reverence for the Earth
and a vision of Nature as the ultimate
context for human existence...*