

# An ecospirituality of nature's beauty: A hopeful conversation in the current climate crisis

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Since our earliest hominid ancestors, humans have found nature beautiful, feeling a sense of the numinous in its presence. However, evolutionary biology has been unsuccessful in providing a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon in terms of natural selection pressures. Firstly, the article takes a walk down anthropological memory lane, tracing the origins of why humans find nature beautiful, giving rise to religious and non-religious sensations. Secondly, the article explores why traditional natural selection mechanisms do not support a bio-aesthetic model that attempts to reduce beauty to physiological utilitarian value. Thirdly, the article offers an alternative explanation relying on the ecotheology of Jonathan Edwards, framing the love of a communicative God who creates nature's 'secondary beauty' to mirror God's own 'primary beauty'. As humans encounter beauty in nature, they are receiving the outpouring of grace to support human thriving by the divine action of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the article offers a Christological ecospirituality drawing on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who loved nature and its innate wisdom. Through his spiritual practices of prayer and teaching, whether at the seaside, in gardens or on the mountainside, he offers a renewed human love affair with nature and a deep contemplation of its beauty that revives the soul. A recovered love of nature, and our birthright interconnection with all creatures, open a new conversation in the present climate catastrophe that holds hope for the flourishing of humans, all its creatures and our ecological home.

**Contribution:** This article offers a hopeful conversation in the current climate catastrophe that implores humans to recover their ancient love of, and interdependence with, the beauty of the natural world. This is viewed as communication of God's grace in a Christology of Nature towards the flourishing of humans, the earth and all its creatures.

**Keywords:** ecotheology; science and theology; nature aesthetics; aesthetic theology; environment and spirituality; climate crisis; theology of nature.

## Introduction: The beauty of the earth: A human story

Have you ever wondered why humans find nature beautiful? From the awe-inspiring grandeur of a snow-capped mountain range to the exciting wonder of a nest full of cheeping baby robin chicks in your backyard, humans from all time periods, spanning culture, custom, religion and geography, have reported an attraction to the beauty of nature and a feeling of the numinous in its presence (Livingston 2009:37–38). Finding nature beautiful is a uniquely human story.

A trek down hominid anthropological 'memory lane' shows that the daily lives of our earliest ancestors were intimately tied to the natural world. Their existence was in sync with the environment, and their survival depended on it. However, was the origin of our human relationship with nature merely a matter of resource acquisition and confronting the powerful forces of nature to control and dominate? Anthropological evidence is answering this question in the negative (Livingston 2009:39). Prehistoric hominids such as *Homo neanderthanensis* and *Homo sapiens* had a much deeper and intimate interrelation with their cohabitating creatures and the natural wonders they encountered. Pre-Neolithic cave art dating from as early as ~65 000 years ago depicts lively and often adventurous scenes of animals such as horses, bulls, mammoths, boars, mountains, celestial bodies and people on the hunt (Brum 2021:4–5; Hoffmann & Standish 2018:1–2). Our Neanderthal cousins, followed by the earliest humans, recorded images of the sheer beauty of it, as they were inspired by the creatures and natural processes in their world (Whitley 2009:32).

The work of anthropologists E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer suggests that prehistoric reactions to the daily operations of nature in sunsets and thunderstorms, forest fires and solar eclipses, inspired awe

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within the heart and psyche of our ancient forebears. This induced a rising sense of the infinite, the 'divinity behind the world', which gave birth to the earliest forms of religion, including animism and magic (Pals 2015:18–20). In this way, *Homo sapiens* became the first and only species to acquire, through the grandeur and beauty of the natural biosphere, a capacity for spiritual self-transcendence. As a result, anthropologists have applied the addended scientific epithet, *Homo sapiens religiosus*, to the species (Livingstone 2009:11). In this anthropological construct, *Homo s. religiosus*, through neurological development, acquired a sense of self-consciousness, a self-transcendence that pioneered a fascination of the created biosphere to investigation, study and an engagement with the environment that was both tactical and spiritual (Livingstone 2009:10–11).

Therefore, in this context, what it means to be human is the capacity for many evolved emergent anatomical and neurological properties, and with that, the capacity to experience beauty and spiritual transcendence (Pals 2015):

They do not worship sticks and stones; they adore the 'anima' within, the spirit that – not wholly unlike the God of Christians themselves – gives the wood or the stick or substance of the stone its life and power. (p. 24)

This insightful analysis into the psyche and soul of our ancestors gives us some clues into the significance of directed attention to nature for physical, emotional and spiritual connection, community and communion. *Homo s. religiosus* drew vitality, well-being and strength from nature's majesty, shadowing forth important means of making sense of its complex mechanisms, translating their felt numinous experience in sacred ritual, myth and symbol. As a result, according to the scholarship of Mircea Eliade, it is impossible for humans to live in a completely profane, desecralised world (Eliade 1961:20–24). Humans have universally demonstrated an appreciation for nature's beauty and possess the cognitive propensity to virtue it as a sacred portal to the divine. But the question is, how is this so? What evolutionary processes might have been in operation to select this universal and all-important human experience that birthed all religious and non-religious sensations of transcendent connection, happiness and well-being in nature? To address these questions, we must explore bio-aesthetics by way of an evolutionary model.

## Can we account for humanity's capacity for aesthetic appreciation of nature's beauty in evolutionary terms?

In order to apprehend the story of humanity's protracted and ancient love affair with nature, there is just one small dilemma that needs to be resolved. In the field of biological aesthetics, there is currently no satisfactory evolutionary explanation of *why* humans find nature beautiful, or how such a profound aesthetic capacity could have evolved based on natural selection pressures alone. In fact, the field of bio-aesthetics

rejects the ideation that animals in general have the cognitive capacity for appreciation of beauty, unless beauty in some form is a direct causal indicator of sexual and physiological fitness (Prum 2017:33). In a mechanised naturalistic view, beauty in nature serves no teleological purpose but is a random by-product of genetic linkage to utilitarian value and superior function. Unfortunately, despite attempts to subtract aesthetic attraction from the biological equation, no such genetic linkage has been found. In fact, male birds with the most ornate plumage have no such implications of superior fitness; they are no more healthy, nor vital, nor are better at protecting females, nor do they possess discernably superior skills in caring for young (Prum 2017:34). In other words, by female birds preferentially selecting beautiful males, the most colourful and elaborate species on earth have evolved largely devoid of utilitarian advantage. To drive this point home, just envision the spray of plumage on a peacock's tail or the elaborate feathered display and courtship dance of the Great Argus. This represents sheer beauty for beauty's sake.

Despite the best efforts of biology to provide a non-teleological, mechanistic and evolutionary account to link function to the spectacular, the best we are offered is a 'tired, worn-out science that consistently fails to account for the evolution of beauty in the natural world' (Prum 2017:68). In the biological world, beauty seems to exist beyond natural selection pressures sifting genes for utility, as Richard Prum (2017) goes on to say:

In Darwin's own bold realization of the evolutionary consequences of the subjective aesthetic experience [there exists] the intellectual insufficiency of natural selection to explain the phenomenon of beauty in nature. (p. 51)

While ornithologists have argued the value of bio-aesthetics in avian species, the very same question is asked of the human species. Is there an evolutionary advantage for humans to find nature beautiful apart from its utilitarian value for survival? In other words, why is it that you stop and take pause when you see a rainbow across the expanse of sky? What exactly is that rush of feeling that 'takes your breath away' when you experience a sunset ablaze with colour? What about the peace you experience while looking up on a perfectly clear starry night? Again, as with bird plumage, biologists cannot find any single survival selection pressure for the neurological evolution of a cognitive appreciation of nature's beauty in humans. In fact, in primitive human evolution, gazing deeply at a glistening spider's web in the grass might *reduce* survivability by distraction and reduced vigilance, leaving one open to danger and predation. In addition, wasting time and energy puts organisms at an evolutionary disadvantage. For large animals such as humans, activities *unnecessary* for survival, such as gazing at the full moon or watching a thunderstorm, are particularly expensive and evolutionarily counterproductive (Winslow 2020a:139–140). No matter where we look for evidence of a causal evolutionary mechanism selecting for the human capacity of finding nature beautiful, we do not arrive at a physiological, genetic or environmental natural selection

pressure that would make this trait advantageous for survival but is in fact, the opposite.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we are left with no satisfying *evolutionary* explanation for why humans find nature beautiful. For the earliest of our ancestral cousins, being moved in the heart by observing an eagle soar, or the sunlight reflecting like a thousand diamonds on the surface of the blue sea is counter to the paradigm of survival of the fittest. However, the feeling in the heart, let us call it the *sense of the numinous*, was birthed in *Homo s. religiosus* and indeed served a purpose for more than mere survival, but for flourishing on a spiritual, metaphysical level (Otto 1950:7). Thus, beyond mere cognition presides the uniquely human capacity to be drawn to nature's beauty as a portal to the numinous, a connection to the supernatural. The holy and sacral sense of the transcendent was felt and expressed in myth, ritual, story and religions when individuals, tribes and groups were immersed in nature's splendour and terror, despite evolution's biological laws acting against it.

If humans flourished when engaged in intimate connection with nature, and the accepted biological laws of selection fail to explain it, might there be an alternative explanation for this? Towards answering this question, we will next turn to Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century theologian, pastor, poet and naturalist who provides a rationale whereby natural beauty intimates an intentional function in human flourishing, being understood from a distinctly theistic point of view.

## Jonathan Edwards' ecotheology posits the human appreciation of nature's beauty as a divine communication of grace

What is most interesting from a biological *and* teleological standpoint is that *universally*, humans have consistently reported experiencing a restorative effect on physical health, psychological wellbeing, deep connection and spiritual fulfilment from exposure to nature. In fact, as evidenced even today by vacations by the sea, cabins at the lake or ski trips in the Alps, humans still derive a profound sense of flourishing from being in sync with nature (De Smedt & De Cruz 2013: 168; Volf 2015:83).

According to Jonathan Edwards, the foremost theologian on beauty and aesthetics, as well as a forerunner of modern ecotheology, human flourishing by being in sync with nature ontologically represents an emotional and spiritual communication of God to humans through a *language of nature*, translated and understood by all people, as Edwards says, 'The works of God are but a kind of voice or language of God,

<sup>1</sup>This is not to say that appreciation of beauty in nature holds no intrinsic significance for humans, quite the contrary. According to Kant, nature's aesthetic is important for human cognitive faculties and reflection. But this condition would have had to come long after the trait evolved and could not have been a factor in its selection. In ancient cultures, more than 50 000 years after the birth of nature's attraction in primitive hominids, aesthetics in nature became important for reflecting judgment, understanding of the workings of nature, development of creation myth and story, and psychological development in other areas of life (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/#3.2>).

to instruct intelligent beings in things pertaining to himself' (Edwards 1993:67; Strachan & Sweeny 2010). Speaking through nature's beauty, the communicative, relational Creator is continuously overflowing divine love to human beings in the very elements of nature they encounter in their daily lives (Winslow 2020a, 2020b). In moments of immersion in nature's beauty, there is a relational communion between the human creature, the creatures and landscapes comprising the natural world, and the divine Creator, intertwined in a *gospel of nature*, producing the effect of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Roszak 2021:3). Theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes this feeling as being 'wildly, lavishly, magnificently loved as creatures who cannot shake off the divine love' (Moe-Lobeda 2020:98).

In this way, *the entire world*, proclaiming extravagant beauty, is a communication of divine love, whereby nature itself is *creatio ex amore*, created out of love (Moltmann 2019:11). God's loving motivation to create nature as wildly beautiful as it is, and to fashion humans neurologically with the capacity to experience and understand it, is God's disposition to share the supremely valuable divine beauty (Edwards 1989:561). Humans receive the benefits of being given direct access to, and a personal experience of, the beauty of God. As a result, the intended outcome of lifting the heart in restorative joy and connection to something unexplainably sacred is deeply felt, as attested by the scriptures as in Psalm 23 where God 'makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me besides still waters, and restores my soul'.

In *Treatise on Grace*, Edwards corresponds this externalisation of God's own 'primary beauty' in nature with the free and continuous outpouring of 'common grace' available to all humans. In a divine act of the Holy Spirit, the messages of divine wisdom and numinous sensations experienced are revealed through the 'secondary beauty' of nature, which functions to restore the human soul (Edwards 1989:561–562, 2003:57, 154). While this universal experience of common grace does not need to be understood in religious or even spiritual terms, it is the Spirit acting benevolently, nonetheless. Edwards reminds us that by delighting in nature's resplendent beauty, all humans, regardless of religious affiliation or none, are 'partakers of the divine nature' and as a result, people flourish (Edwards 1994:410, 2003:159).

Receiving grace through the restorative beauty of nature by way of an Edwardsian ecospirituality of nature is an instantaneous act-result of the Spirit, requiring nothing other than being human. In other words, when people feel happy and alive as they are immersed in nature's supreme beauty, it is the act-result of God's absolute delight in sharing divine beauty with the beloved creatures, who are in turn transformed, restored and refreshed in body, soul and mind.

However, how can such a life-giving, relational reciprocity between God, nature and humanity be explained and understood in the contemporary ecological crisis if our planet is in grave danger, being irreversibly destroyed? We are witnessing right before us climate instability, pollution,

habitat destruction, species loss and the exhaustion of natural resources. The abundant flourishing of the Earth's bucolic beauty, along with the protection and thriving of endangered plant and animal species, is being devastated. One is left to wonder, where can guidance and hope be found?

## A hopeful conversation about climate catastrophe and the biocentric flourishing of humans, the earth and all its creatures: *Toward a Christology of nature*

Based on the previous discussion, a theological understanding of the metaphysical reciprocity between God, humans and the biosphere can be expressed in terms of a *Theology of Nature*, where God's divine ideas for communicating spiritual truths are embedded in nature. These truths are given by grace to humans through a *Pneumatology of Nature* in revelation by the Holy Spirit. But what of a *Christology of Nature*?<sup>2</sup> How might the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth offer us a new conversation, particularly in light of the imminent global climatological crisis?

To address these questions, we can look at the life of Christ as narrated in Gospels through an ecological lens. Jesus the poet-carpenter was deeply interconnected with the natural world. In the Gospel accounts, we find Jesus teaching the crowds on the lakeshore (Mk 4:1–4) and preaching from a boat-pulpit out on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 13:2). He frequently taught on the beautiful mountainsides of Galilee (Mt 5:1). Oftentimes, he stole away to the green and peaceful garden of the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, where he no doubt listened to the peaceful swish of the slender leaves in the breeze as the disciples came up to ask him questions (Mt 24:3; Mk 13:1–37). We see a man who often went to the quiet of the garden by himself or with his disciples to pray, sometimes spending all night under the stars (Lk 6:12). In his most distressed moment, we find him at the foot of the Mount of Olives in the lush Garden of Gethsemane, caressed by fragrance of trees and flowers, praying the penetrating words, 'Father, take this cup from me' (Mt 26:39). We are told in the Gospel of John that Jesus' friends buried him in a garden tomb, wanting him to have his eternal rest surrounded by the trees, birds, flowers and the natural beauty that he loved so much. But as we know, he rose from that tomb, and when he appeared to Mary, there was Jesus, walking in the garden, once again finding comfort, peace and renewal among the fortifying beauty of garden paths (Jn 19:41; 20:15). And, when Jesus of Nazareth left this earth, he ascended from his favourite garden, the Mount of Olives, and he told us that when he returns, it will be back to this very same earthly garden (Ac 1:9–12). It is clear: Jesus of Nazareth loved the natural world.

Based on these accounts, Jesus' experiences of shared attention in nature refreshed his spirit, delighted him and

<sup>2</sup>For a full constructive theology of a *Trinitarian Theology of Nature*, see Winslow (2020b).

comforted him. It was in the serene beauty of nature that he met with the divine Father and had profound spiritual experiences (Lk 9:28–36). In nature's hidden messages, he gleaned life-giving wisdom relayed in the form of analogies and parables that changed the world. In his hands, nature's elements became a witness for the spiritual world. He was so spiritually and metaphysically connected with it that he could even command the wind and waves, multiply the physical molecules of bread and fish, and restructure the very cells and physiology of the body to heal (Winslow 2020b:114–116, 128–129; McFarland 2011:369).

Laced throughout the Gospel accounts, we find Jesus, a master of full immersion into nature's wisdom and beauty, who was intent on welcoming all those in his company into shared attention with the familiar elements of their own ecological world. In each case, Jesus not only teaches sublime and useful spiritual lessons but engages his listeners in the spiritual practice of truly *seeing and participating* with the creatures and elements. For example, in Matthew 6:26, Jesus says, 'Look at the birds of the air: They do not sow or reap or gather into barns'. For the term translated as 'look', the Gospel writer used the Greek word ἐμβλέπω (*emblemō*) signifying to look attentively or gaze earnestly. Again, in verse 28, 'And why do you worry about clothes? Consider how the lilies of the field grow, they do not labor or spin', the Gospel writer used the hapax legomenon καταμανθάνω (*katamanthano*) for the word 'consider', which means to note carefully, observe thoroughly or diligently contemplate. In both instances, the Greek diction reveals that Jesus led people in an ecospirituality of sustained, mindful contemplation and participation with the beauty that nature offers to the human soul.

However, Jesus' ecological message of attentiveness to nature's healing beauty is sorely overlooked, and routinely dismissed in a fast-paced, stressed culture that has lost its valuation of the human connection to the natural world. The poet Mary Oliver (2006) contributes a contemporary voice to show the way back:

What if a hundred rose-breasted grosbeaks  
flew in circles around your head?  
What if the brook slid downhill just  
past your bedroom window so you could listen  
to its slow prayers as you fell asleep?  
What if the stars began to shout their names?  
What if you suddenly saw that the silver of water  
was brighter than the silver of money? (p. 57)

These lines invite a way of life evoking a Christlike ecospirituality of mindful attention that takes pause and notices the sensory sights and sounds of beauty offered by the Earth's creatures and elements. This becomes a participatory life of receiving God's outpouring of grace, where all creatures, human and non-human, share a vibrant, interconnected ecological home, thriving *together*.

If this is what humans are intended to experience in nature, why would degradation and exploitation of the environment ever exist? Since the time of the industrial revolution, individuals and societies have increasingly lost their birthright connection to this vital element of human thriving (Jonsson 2012:2). According to an 'ecofeminist theocosmology', traditional harmful patriarchal ideologies have yielded the outcomes of climate catastrophe due to the spiritual toxicology of greed, selfishness, carelessness, exploitation and even laziness (Paeth 2011:213; Ruether 1994:247–253; Winslow 2022). As a result, many people, and even whole societies, have lost their ancient love of nature's beauty, trading the awareness of our creaturely interdependence with a reliance on wealth and technology.

This ideology of greed, exploitation and depletion has diminished the value of living creatures and non-living resources such as clean water and rich soil, stripping the environment of natural resources, and in the scourging and destruction of ecosystems that are vital for all human and non-human life to exist. The beautiful Earth is scourged, bleeding, betrayed, abused, wounded and dying. Here, the Earth is yet again speaking typologically, pointing us to the stripping, scourging, betrayal, abuse and wounding, in the crucifixion of the body of Jesus. Are we as humans now 'crucifying' the Earth in a similar way, and for the very same reasons of greed, selfishness and power?

The moral critique of these actions and ecological injustices is revealed most poignantly in developing countries whose populations are the most vulnerable; the impoverished, the poor, and disadvantaged groups like women and children all suffer the most, yet have contributed the least to the problem (Painter 2022:2–3). In privileged societies, who are largely the countries contributing the most to the destruction of nature's beauty and resources, we find an increasing culture of detached, isolated, angry and even hateful people feeling fearful, anxious, disgusted, unhappy and despondent. For causal determinants, we can point to the milieu of social unrest, political injustices, ongoing war, COVID-19 pandemic and climate collapse, within which people are weighed down, overworked, busy, distracted and preoccupied with the shear stress and negativity of their lives (Park 2021:1–4; Volf 2015:55, 83). One wonders if there is a crucial connection. The farther *Homo sapiens* deviates from living as *Homo s. religiosus* in communion with the sacred beauty of nature, as did Jesus of Nazareth and all of our hominid ancestors, the more destruction and exploitation of nature's beauty there is, the more anger, fear and anxiety that persists, and the less joy, wonder, peace and transcendence that is experienced.

It seems that what has been relinquished from our prehistoric cousins, and weeded out of the teachings of Christ, is the human love for the innate, universal feeling we have in nature's beauty and the wondrous sense of the numinous. This comes at the cost of thriving physically, emotionally and communally with the Earth and all its creatures. It is a general

principle that *we protect what we love*, and in failing to love the beauty of the Earth, we have failed to protect it, and in turn, we have failed to protect our fellow creatures and ourselves. A return to our prehistoric roots in shared attention to nature, and to the living ecospirituality of Jesus of Nazareth through God's grace bestowed in nature's messages, might just set the course right.

One way forward towards healing in the current climate crisis is an intentional decision to move away from traditional patriarchal ideologies that have yielded the fruits of domination and exploitation and turn toward an Edwardsian, Christological interconnection with nature's beauty, recognising and valuing the beauty of nature and our living interdependence with it.

The first step in this kind of living ecospirituality is to recognise that as *Homo s. religiosus*, we thrive when we are in connection with nature's creatures, landscapes and ecologies, interacting together with the communicating loving God who is continually reaching out with moment-by-moment grace. Grasping this opens a living and active alertness to a biocentrism where humans reclaim their ancestral and spiritual love of the natural world (Moltmann 2019:7). When our humanity is linked once again to our interdependence with nature's beauty, a renewed sense of joy, connection and thriving can be achieved, as Mary Oliver (1992) again instructs:

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth. (p. 10)

In these poetic lines, we find a mindful recovery of the beauty, fascination and mindful interconnection in a deeply personal biocentric view of nature, one that holds the potential for a transformative *call to action*. As people become reacquainted with their birthright connection to the beauty of nature and receive life-giving grace in their experience of it, the natural response flows out to preserve and conserve it. Oliver ends the poem in a call to action by exhorting humanity to intimately embrace the astonishing beauty of nature, exclaiming, 'I don't want to end up simply having visited this world' (Oliver 1992:10).

Oliver's lines connect a long, woven thread beginning with our prehistoric ancestors who felt the numinous of the divine in nature, up through ancient religions developing religious ritual and myth around trees and rivers, bridging the ancient world to the modern in the ecospirituality of Jesus of Nazareth, formulated in the ecotheology of Jonathan Edwards. These teachers give us a new conversation, one of returning to our universal human love of nature's beauty to bring much-needed hope and positive activism to a world despairing about the future. This spiritual ecotheology is an outlook on life that sees something sacred in people, animals,

plants and the Earth, and finding *our truest selves* there. It invites us, surely, to love this stunning world that God has made. And, if we love the beauty of the biological world, in all of its abundance to us, we will naturally seek to protect it and all of its creatures.

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