QUAKERS AND NATURE

By Joel and Jeff Meyer

JOEL WRITES:

The Quaker concept of "that of God in everyone" speaks to me very powerfully. It is a reminder that everyone has something to teach and something to offer, that everyone is deserving of love and respect.

I mention that point in this article because I feel that there is that of God not just in all humans, but in all of creation. The beauty I see and the awe I feel in nature strengthen my faith, just as it is strengthened when I perceive that of God in others. I sometimes find it easier to listen to God when in nature than when in meeting for worship. Most of all, I feel the same sense of rightness of action when composting or commuting by bike or working in the garden, as when volunteering meals or working against war.

A quick internet search showed me that I am far from original in suggesting that seeing that of God in all of Creation is a very Quaker perspective on environmentalism. Some, interestingly, feel that such a view is incompatible with science, which is surprising to me since I am a scientist. For me, science—ultimately, the study of nature—strengthens my faith. I feel lucky to have a career as an environmental scientist, because I enjoy both the satisfaction of helping protect the environment, and also the excitement of learning more about nature.

Science has also made it increasingly clear that when environmental degradation occurs, not all people suffer equally. Rather, it is usually the poorest in the world who suffer the most from pollution and unhealthy living conditions. Thus, working to protect the environment benefits not just nature (if we define nature as not including humans!) but people too, and in particular disadvantaged people.

Finally, in most religions—perhaps all—there have at some point in time been believers who viewed nature as divine and to be revered as part of God's creation. In recent decades, many Christian churches have been moving in this direction. The older interpretation of the Creation story that gave humans dominion over the rest of Creation has been giving way to a newer interpretation that gives humans the role of stewards in Creation.

JEFF WRITES:

In my studies of the world's various religions, I have noticed that miracles are important in all of them, "miracles" meaning events that go beyond any natural explanation and are believed to confirm the power and truth of each tradition. In that respect I am no different than any other believer, except that my own miracles aren't so much walking on water or raising the dead, but the everyday miracles I experience all around me: the millions of microorganisms in a table spoon of soil, the 200 miles of roots in a clump of rye grass, the improbable bill of a toucan or the crest of a quail, the silence of the mountains, the colors of a sunset. For me, all of these things point to a mystery "deep down things" (to quote Hopkins). This mystery has been given many names. Friends have called it the Light, Spirit, inner Christ. Sometimes it is more satisfying for me to refrain from trying to name it, simply maintaining a respectful silence. It is a presence I feel in the quiet of some of our gathered meetings. Since this presence is found not only in nature but in all of us, it binds us together in the kinship of a family.

Perhaps what we have said so far sounds rather traditional, a sort of nature mysticism. But even if that is so, the response to this sense of awe before the mystery of nature must be very

different today. The natural world is a gift to us. Although we did not create it, we can destroy it, or at least so badly disfigure it as to make it incapable of supporting us and unable to express the mystery at its source. We are family. It is our obligation to cherish and protect the natural world that has been given to us. And as Joel points out, we must do this not only for ourselves and our children, but out of Gospel concern for the least of our brothers and sisters upon whom environmental damage falls hardest. Our work to protect nature and maintain a healthy environment can be a contemporary Quaker testimony.

WE QUOTE:

"*And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles.*

Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.

And look into space; you shall see Him walking in the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightning and descending in rain.

You shall see Him smiling in flowers, then rising and waving His hands in trees."

Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

"What I know of the divine science and Holy Scripture I learnt in woods and fields."

St. Bernard, Epistle 106