

Series: **Contemplative Mischief**



Welcome to Episode **7. Brother Sun, Sister Moon.**

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Hello again. In this episode, our friends the somewhat contemplative Two Franciscans are tripping along in their own special way, surfing reality, receiving and transmitting something that is hard to define. They seem to live the Cantic of Creatures, or Cantic of the Sun, of Francis of Assisi. First, let us honour them with a family reunion.

We rightly link Francis the beloved saint of Assisi to a respectful, grateful, reverent, and delighted attitude towards nature – nature as family. In this way of seeing and feeling, and indeed of worshipping, our spiritual hearts are opened again. Each bird and insect, each blade of grass and flowing stream, each mountain and galaxy is profoundly received into our consciousness not as other, but as kin. They are parts of a holy family, all of whose members shimmer with divine presence. They remind us, in case we have forgotten for a while, that we too are shimmering with divine presence. We and the other kinfolk bask in each other's presence.

Kinship listens to the laughter of the stars and the whispering leaves of the trees. Kinship has no truck with strip mining or industrial waste dumped in meadows and sea. Enough said. With Francis we open and surrender to the language of light and leaf, and kneel in the wild and fragrant altar of creation, and listen to the gospel according to donkeys and robins and rabbits and sun-baked lichen and stars.

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With Francis' Canticle of the Sun we turn gratefully to the embracing Sun, wise elder who has taught the whole family of creatures. Of course we humans and animals and plants are no strangers to this generous elder and to each other. We are a choir in a continuing hymn of creation. Our hymn is well-received, for with Meister Eckhart, we look at the flowers and we see God laughing.

At night the moon comforts our restless souls, and we are grateful. With Francis we appreciate even brother death, which also has its place, and is also kin.

Our nature family is patient. From droning bees to aimless flight of butterfly we learn a patience that does not seem to belong to modern life. To savour the scent of the sea, the gentle breeze, the gaze of a placid animal — this is to normalise our harried modern heart, to synchronise it to a more wholesome rhythm. Creation, including ourselves, becomes a living song, a song of offering, of celebration, of serenity.



“When will we ever learn?” continues to resound the sorrowful song. If we ignore the teacher, how can we ever learn? The teaching comes from the rivers and the roots, the light and the darkness, the scavenger insects at their repetitive work, and the tranquil attention of every lizard basking in the sun. It comes from the integration that is lived by the aborigines and other first nations people, harmonising with their sacred places in the bountiful earth. We just have to look, and smell, and listen.

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you.” (*Job 12:7-10*) We would do well to read often what Christianity calls the Book of Creation. It is a living book that speaks of the divine through the voice of the marvels and the disasters, the lives and the deaths, of all creatures: the plants, the animals, the water and the mountains, and the rest of the cosmos near and far.

Our thoughts, our cultural pursuits, our problems often disengage us from the natural world. We lose what presence we know how to have. But Jesus admires the splendour of the flowers: “Consider how the wild flowers grow,” he reminds us, “They do not labour or spin...” (*Luke 12:27*) Nature excels in presence. A heart broken open by wonder is a heart open to the mystery, a heart may hear the prayer of nature, enter the sacred cathedral, and join the prayer.

*Collectors' Tip: The PDF files of Episodes of this Blog Series have been designed for printing on size A5 sheets, or as a A5 size booklet at your printer shop*

## **Kin**

(2009)

not erotic chemistry  
nor friendship  
but kinship here

here, now, this little smudge  
of red-brown earth upon  
a blade of unknown grass  
now known at last

here, lazy street cat  
rolls on her back  
for kindly stroke  
obliging trust

here, gentle touch  
quiet share

here, now,  
almost painful urge  
to rejoice, to dance  
in festive celebration

what he thought he was  
evaporates slowly on  
a dancing desert path  
unconditional love

here, o Immeasurable — yes!  
Is this I, or sky,  
or You?

here, a gratitude  
under infinite joy

-o-

## **Beside the Clear Stream**

(2005)

beside the clear stream,  
perfumed pine trees still  
quietly stand...  
the lazy song of the bees  
is what it is

around the diplomat's desk  
dozens of phones keep  
ringing...  
scheming men keep straining  
to be what is not

unrushed are pine trees  
for their roots draw deep  
from eternal water  
beside the clear stream

-o-



## **Spiritualities of the World**

Francis of Assisi was an early environmentalist and mystic who saw all elements of creation as a divine embrace. Pope John Paul II in 1979 declared him as the patron saint of ecology, and he is popularly known as the patron saint of animals, birds, and the environment. His teaching evokes respect and care for the natural environment. Such teachings everywhere require humility in our dealings with the natural world, a stewardship of harmony. In most faith traditions, the implications – indeed, the imperatives – are profound. Not only for our understanding the world and what it means to be alive in it, but equally profoundly about who we are ourselves. Nature around us can unlock the potentials of ourselves on various levels emotional, aesthetic and intellectual, affective and spiritual.

Francis can bring to our minds his kindred spirits throughout the ages - mystic gardeners, nature mystics, or teachers of nature spirituality. These figures are revered in various cultures for their deep spiritual connection to nature, and for their teachings that promote harmony of humans with the natural world.

In Sufism, Jalaluddin Rumi saw the entire universe as a mirror of divine beauty: "The garden of Love is green without limit." Abu Sa'id used metaphors of roses and gardens to describe spiritual states. He was among the Sufi saints who retreated into nature to pray and commune. The gardener tending the inner rose garden is a frequent image in Persian poetry.

Hinduism has its sages like Valmiki and Vishvamitra, who are remarkable for their spiritual insights, as well as the traditions of yoga and Ayurveda that emphasise living in harmony with natural laws. Nature as sacred feminine energy, or Prakriti, underlies much of Hindu environmental sensitivity. The spiritual way of love and devotion, or bhakti, has generated many bhakti saints who saw all creation as the body of the Divine. One of these is Mirabai, who merged her devotion of Krishna with a love for the living earth. She spoke of the forest as her temple.

The Buddha often taught in forests and spoke of interconnectedness. He encouraged monks and nuns to live in harmony with nature. Buddhism has nature-attuned mystics and monks, such as Milarepa, who embody a deep reverence for the natural world, some living as ascetics in forests and mountains, emphasising and practising mindfulness and compassion for all beings. Zen Buddhist monks in Japan cultivated gardens as spiritual practice. The

Zen poet-monk Ryōkan lived simply and celebrated frogs, dew, and moon in his verse.

Taoism, the philosophy-religion of living in harmony with the Tao, or the natural 'way' that flows through all life, features a profound respect for the cycles and balance of nature. The Taoist sage Laozi or Lau Tzu taught simplicity and humility in relation with the natural environment. Taoist hermits often cultivated gardens as spiritual retreats, blending simplicity with deep attunement to the rhythms of earth and sky. Zhuangzi or Chuang Tzu used nature imagery to illustrate spiritual freedom, like fish swimming effortlessly or the uncarved block.

Many indigenous teachers reflect a culture where earth is mother and all beings are kin. Black Elk spoke of the sacred hoop, the unity of all life, and he spoke of visions that involved animals and plants as teachers.

### **In Christianity, is nature a path to God?**

Inspired by such a romp through humanity's spiritual traditions, we now return to Christian history, where a few luminaries help us to answer the question: *Is nature a path to God?*

Christian mystical and contemplative traditions, include writers who emphasise the sacramentality of creation - the idea that everything in the created world can be a doorway to the divine. Leading lights showing this path for us include Francis of Assisi of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He remained deeply inspired by his love for the crucified Christ, which led him to spiritual immersion in the Incarnation. The elements of creation he saw as kinfolk who reveal the Presence of God.

## Ripples

(2005)

blue-grey sky, open, clear, high  
honey-bees drone, dung-beetles roll  
mist-damp meadows flower

morning sun raises scented steam  
yesterday's rain, puddles, pools  
mud-settled clear water on the path

sparrow alert at water's edge  
spies seed below limpid surface  
dips beak, picks seed

spreads ripples across sky

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His Canticle of the Creatures embodies the spirit of coming closer to God by coming closer to created things.

We find Meister Eckhart in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century speaking about encountering God in the ordinary and concrete Eckhart often expressed the idea that by being present to the created world, one is drawn into the divine ground. His understanding of the immanence of God in creation, but also the transcendence of God, could be paraphrased faithfully as follows: God is in all things, but all things are not God. He often expressed the idea that by being present to the created world, one is drawn into the divine ground! He wrote, "God is in all things, every creature is full of God and is a book about God." (*Eckhart, ca. 1300–1327/1981, Sermon 2; see also DW II*)



In the 20<sup>th</sup> century inspiration came with the Jesuit priest and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who emphasised finding God in the material world and in the process of evolution. He wrote lines such as "By virtue of the Creation, and still more of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see." After him came the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who wrote about seeing God in all things and about the contemplative practice of "seeing through" objects into the divine depth beneath them.

In our time we have contemplative teachers such as Richard Rohr and Cynthia Bourgeault. They often encourage a non-dual approach: seeing God in the everyday, in the details of ordinary life. Rohr has said similar things like "Everything belongs," and "God comes to us disguised as our life." One of his books is called "Everything Belongs – the gift of contemplative prayer." (1999) The phrase "God comes to us disguised as our life" has come to be linked to his outlook.

Authentic spirituality blossoms when we kneel low enough to see the face of the Divine reflected even in a dew drop, or a worm turning the soil. May we be that kind of gardener. Our

emotional heart must beat at a wholesome rhythm. Our spiritual heart must receive the heavenly music.

In the end, Francis and the other luminaries show us that our deepest laughter and our deepest stillness are but two faces of the same cosmic dance — a dance of belonging beyond measure. Regarding every creature as full of God, we can love it and read it a “book about God.” Now we can join others in a universal worship, as nature is common to us all, and inside us all.

The same mischief that giggles in a fox’s den (have you ever heard a fox’s ecstatic laughter?) is the same stillness that hushes the mountain before dawn. All of it points us back to the mystery that called us into being, and calls us still.

## **Heartbeat**

(2003)

I listened to the heartbeat of the earth today.  
Its rhythm was the deep hiss of the waves  
on the shore, and the bass roar of the wind,

and the sea cave booms, and the falling-marbles  
clatter of the pebbles as they fell over each other  
to follow each retreating wave.

The rhythm of the earth was kind today.  
Insistent, pervasive, but gentle today.  
And slower than the beat of my heart.

There was a melody too, of luminous spray,  
of clouds that sailed through skies in a  
startling symphony of light.



## 7. Brother Sun, Sister Moon

*creation does not speak to be heard; it breathes to be met in brotherly recognition.*

*the earth sings not to perform, but to remember itself in us.*

*light and leaf and wing do not teach—they reveal what never needed explaining.*



7:1

Two Franciscans walk into a forest at dusk...  
The last light of Brother Sun filters through the pines,  
and Sister Moon already peeks over the treetops.

7:2

Two Franciscans stop walking and point towards Sister  
Moon.  
So beautiful, so unreachable with words.  
They start arguing about each other's fingers.

7:3

Two Franciscans walk into the first snowfall...  
They leave no trail,  
just stillness, deepening.

7:4

Two Franciscans walk into a beehive's hum...  
They hum back.

7:5

Two Franciscans walk into a field of fireflies...  
They don't chase the light.  
They let it find them.

7:6

Two Franciscans walk into an animal shelter...  
Two large cats ambush them.  
The cats adopt them with great enthusiasm.

7:7

Two Franciscans walk into the rising sun...  
They don't squint.  
They open.

7:8

Two Franciscans walk into a garden at dusk...  
They water a wilted lily.  
It opens during Compline.

7:9

Two Franciscans walk into a forgotten hillside  
orchard...  
They taste the windfall apples  
A sacramental act.

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7:13 trees of peace...



7:8 opening during Compline...

7:10

Two Franciscans walk into a thunderstorm...  
One dances.  
The other translates.

7:11

Two Franciscans walk into a field of brother thorns...  
They aimed to practice communion.  
Community can be painful sometimes.

7:12

Two Franciscans walk into the monastery visitors'  
parlour...  
Distant cousins talk and talk.  
Until the night lets them go.

7:13

Two Franciscans walk into the breath of a forest...  
The trees exhale peace.

7:14

Two Franciscans walk into a floodplain at dawn...  
They float a hymn downstream.

7:15

Two Franciscans walk into a bell tower at dusk...  
One listens to the silence after the chime.  
The other listens to the silence before it.

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