

## CAN READING A POEM CHANGE POLITICS?

Carl J. Strikwerda  
Emergent Scholars Talk  
Sunday, March 12, 2017  
KAV, Elizabethtown College

Can reading a poem change politics? Just last year, we celebrated the centennial, the hundredth anniversary of the U.S. National Parks Service. The creation of national parks and of the Parks Service serve as landmarks in human respect for the environment. For thousands of years, human beings, with the exception of a few Christian and Buddhist monks, typically saw nature as something to be fought against, feared, or simply exploited. Today, we realize how precious and fragile our natural habitat is, and how much we depend on it.

Where did this change in attitude come from? We can learn a lot about how ideas change minds and eventually politics by trying to answer this question.

One surprising place to start is with a poet, William Wordsworth, perhaps the greatest English poet of the nineteenth century. Wordsworth may seem a bit of an odd ancestor for a movement that scientists champion now; after all, he was a romantic, who loved nature in what some think of as a gushy, emotional sort of way, but just because he was a romantic, wasn't he anti-science?

In fact, Wordsworth was NOT opposed to science. One of his most famous lines is one of his most often mis-understood lines: he objected to the "philosopher" who would "botanise upon his mother's grave," in other words, supposedly, the scientist who would analyze reality rather than understand human beings, including his own mother. But, in fact, the "philosopher" for Wordsworth was the politician, soldier, lawyer, doctor, indeed anyone who, in one critic's words, "was too busy to be wise." Wordsworth loved geometry, astronomy, and physics, just as much as he loved flowers, trees, and birds. A stature of Newton was one of his prized possessions. He criticized humanists, as well as scientists, if they failed to grasp the depths of human emotion:

Enough of Science and Art:  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

Wordsworth advocated what a scientist would call an empirical or inductive approach, looking at the world closely and trying to understand it "with a heart that watches and receives."

Wordsworth believed that Newtonian physics revealed the unity of all creation. Listen to this from Book Three of The Prelude:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower  
 Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
 I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,  
 Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass  
 Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all  
 That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

Biology and astronomy formed a whole. This is from one of his "Lucy" poems, lines that almost sound like Japanese haiku:

A violet by a mossy stone  
 Half hidden from the eye!  
 --Fair as a star, when only one  
 Is shining in the sky.

The American writers whom we call the Transcendentalists took Wordsworth at his word and helped spread a new environmental consciousness. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "nature is the symbol of the spirit...the world is emblematic." Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau wrote of his two years spent living as a hermit by Walden Pond: "I went to the woods because I wished to see if I could not learn what it had to teach."

Soon after the Transcendentalists wrote, a pioneer farmer from Wisconsin named John Muir settled in California. There, the mountains overwhelmed him with their majesty. One of Muir's favorite writers was Thoreau. Thoreau died young, but who did Muir accompany in California to see the sequoias, the largest living things on earth? Emerson. Wandering the Sierra Nevada range, Muir concluded, in the spirit of Wordsworth and the Transcendentalists, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." This insight drove Muir to save the America's natural bounty in order to help save his fellow Americans. Nature could teach us the depths of our connectedness to nature, help us to lose our pettiness, and lift our spirits in order to appreciate wonder of all kinds. Muir, although he claimed to have left the staunch Christianity of his family behind as he grew older, never lost his sense of evangelicalism: "John the Baptist was not more eager to get all of his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains."

And who did Muir take on backpacking and horse packing tours of Yosemite and the Sierras? President Teddy Roosevelt. Teddy was, until Barack Obama, the president who expanded the national parks, forests, and preserves more than any other. Roosevelt complained that before he got to work, "The American had but one thought about a tree, and that was to cut it down." All kinds of North American species of birds and animals remain much more abundant today because in six years, from 1903 to 1909, Teddy Roosevelt created 51 wildlife refuges. As one of the leaders of environmental protection noted, Roosevelt "changed the attitude of the American people toward conserving natural resources."

As profound as Roosevelt's achievements were, national parks, forests, and wildlife refuges only preserved nature: they did not, as Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Muir had pleaded, convert Americans into learning what these natural areas taught us about civilization's intimate dependence on nature. Nature was here; civilization there. Ironically, it was finally when Americans realized that we had created an artificial divide between nature in its most extreme, wilderness, and civilization did we begin to learn that we depend on the natural environment at the risk of losing civilization itself. Thanks to the work of activists and writers such as Rachel Carson, Denis Hayes, Roderick Nash, and many others, in the 1960s an ecological awareness movement arose that has helped to preserve nature in its most untouched areas but also to preserve the delicate balance with nature on which human life everywhere depends. By 1970, when President Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, the spirit of Thoreau and Muir had begun to penetrate our culture and change our way of understanding nature.

Since then, new lessons continue to emerge. When Thoreau wrote, "from the forest and wilderness" come "the tonics and the barks that brace mankind" readers interpreted him metaphorically. Nature stimulated us like a tonic and gave us energy. But Thoreau was wiser than we knew. Paclitaxel or PTX, sold often as Taxol, is a life-saving drug against breast, ovarian, and lung cancer. For decades, the only source of Taxol was--anyone?--from the Pacific yew, one of the trees that John Muir loved. Scientists now estimate that we have discovered only a tiny portion of the medicinal drugs that can be derived from nature. Our very lives can depend on mysteries in nature that we have yet to understand.

Wordsworth's belief in the power of nature to heal has even begun to be confirmed by neurological research. In controlled studies, as little as 15 minutes in the woods has been shown to reduce levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. Increase the exposure to nature to 45 minutes and most individuals in these studies experience improved cognitive performance. Scientists still don't know why. It may be that the natural aerosols in forests that act as mild sedatives. Natural sounds and sights may serve as a subtle form of hypnosis. Or, natural patterns act lightly on the retina and set off relaxing brain waves. Whatever the reason, Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Muir sensed much more about the human need for nature than we have realized.

So, congratulations to all of you Emergent Scholars. You have achieved an impressive level of intellectual achievement. For you to have earned the cumulative GPA that you have at a liberal arts college like Elizabethtown was only possible because you mastered subjects from the natural sciences to social sciences to humanities and often professional studies courses as well. In other words, you've gotten where you are by bridging what the great British scientist C.P. Snow called the two cultures, sciences and mathematics, on the one hand, and the humanities and arts, on the other.

In the years ahead, keep connecting those worlds. In our age of specialization, too many gifted people think that professions markedly different than their own are strange or even useless. Don't believe it. There's a great phrase that Renaissance humanists and scientists used to

describe their ideal of knowledge: Concordia mundi, bringing together worlds. At their best, the most gifted intellectuals among us know how important it is to bring together nature and civilization, science and art, poetry and politics.

So, can a poem change politics? It can certainly begin to change people's minds, and perhaps their hearts, and there is nothing, nothing more powerful, more to be treasured, than minds and hearts that have been changed. If you haven't gone to the national parks recently, go. If you haven't appreciated what it is help to change politics, write a letter to your representative in Congress, or volunteer with a group like our College Democrats, College Republicans, or Young Americans for Liberty. If you haven't read poetry lately, read it now.

And know with Wordsworth, that "A violet by a mossy stone can be fair as a star, when only one is shining in the sky".