

Nature and the Serious Work of Joy by Maria Popova

“Our origins are of the earth. And so there is in us a deeply seated response to the natural universe, which is part of our humanity,” Rachel Carson wrote in reflecting on our spiritual bond with nature shortly before she awakened the modern environmental conscience.

The rewards and redemptions of that elemental yet endangered response is what British naturalist and environmental writer Michael McCarthy, a modern-day Carson, explores in *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy* (public library) — part memoir and part manifesto, a work of philosophy rooted in environmental science and buoyed by a soaring poetic imagination.

McCarthy writes:

On Being Studios · Nature, Joy, and Human Becoming

The natural world can offer us more than the means to survive, on the one hand, or mortal risks to be avoided, on the other: it can offer us joy.

[...]

There can be occasions when we suddenly and involuntarily find ourselves loving the natural world with a startling intensity, in a burst of emotion which we may not fully understand, and the only word that seems to me to be appropriate for this feeling is joy.

“Roots” by Maria Popova

In a sentiment that calls to mind Theodore Roosevelt’s assertion that “the poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer,” McCarthy weighs the particular necessity and particular precariousness of joy in our cynicism-crippled world:

Referring to it as joy may not facilitate its immediate comprehension either, not least because joy is not a concept, nor indeed a word, that we are entirely comfortable with, in the present age. The idea seems out of step with a time whose characteristic notes are mordant and mocking, and whose preferred emotion is irony. Joy hints at an unrestrained enthusiasm which may be thought uncool... It reeks of the Romantic movement. Yet it is there. Being unfashionable has no effect on its existence... What it denotes is a happiness

with an overtone of something more, which we might term an elevated or, indeed, a spiritual quality.

A century and a half after Thoreau extolled nature as a form of prayer and an antidote to the smallening of spirit amid the ego-maelstrom we call society — “In the street and in society I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated, my life is unspeakably mean,” he lamented in his journal — McCarthy considers the role of the transcendent feelings nature can stir in us in a secular world:

They are surely very old, these feelings. They are lodged deep in our tissues and emerge to surprise us. For we forget our origins; in our towns and cities, staring into our screens, we need constantly reminding that we have been operators of computers for a single generation and workers in neon-lit offices for three or four, but we were farmers for five hundred generations, and before that hunter-gatherers for perhaps fifty thousand or more, living with the natural world as part of it as we evolved, and the legacy cannot be done away with.

Earthrise (December 24, 1968)

In consonance with Carl Sagan’s beautiful humanist meditation on the Pale Blue Dot photograph captured by the Voyager spacecraft, McCarthy turns to the first iconic cosmic view of our planet — Earthrise, captured by Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968. Echoing Sagan’s own insight that Earthrise seeded in us a new kind of dual awareness — “the sense of our planet as one in a vast number and the sense of our planet as a place whose destiny depends upon us” — McCarthy writes:

At this moment, for the first time, we saw ourselves from a distance, and the earth in its surrounding dark emptiness not only seemed impossibly beautiful but also impossibly fragile. Most of all, we could see clearly that it was finite. This does not appear to us on the earth’s surface; the land or the sea stretches to the horizon, but there is always something beyond. However many horizons we cross, there’s always another one waiting. Yet on glimpsing the planet from deep space, we saw not only the true wonder of its shimmering blue beauty, but also the true nature of its limits.

In a passage that calls to mind Ursula K. Le Guin’s insistence that “to use the world well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it,” McCarthy places the vital relationship between responsibility and joy at the heart of our relearning of being:

It is time for a different, formal defence of nature. We should offer up not just the notion of being sensible and responsible about it, which is sustainable development, nor the notion of its mammoth utilitarian and financial value, which is ecosystem services, but a third way, something different entirely: we should offer up what it means to our spirits; the love of it. We should offer up its joy.

Illustration from *Beastly Verse* by JooHee Yoon

I have long found the word environment disquieting. Embedded in it is residual Ptolemism that places us at the center of nature and casts the rest of the natural world as something that surrounds us and implicitly revolves around us. The notion of “natural resources” furthers this hubris by framing trees and rivers and meadows as entities and economic assets existing for the satisfaction of our human needs. McCarthy speaks to this civilizational hubris and how it bereaves us of the far greater “resource” which nature can offer us, and has long offered us, not as an exploitable asset but as an unbidden gift:

We can generalise or, indeed, monetise the value of nature’s services in satisfying our corporeal needs, since we all have broadly the same continuous requirement for food and shelter; but we have infinitely different longings for solace and understanding and delight. Their value is modulated, not through economic assessment, but through the personal experiences of individuals. So we cannot say — alas that we cannot — that birdsong, like coral reefs, is worth 375 billion dollars a year in economic terms, but we can say, each of us, that at this moment and at this place it was worth everything to me. Shelley did so with his skylark, and Keats with his nightingale, and Thomas Hardy with the skylark of Shelley, and Edward Thomas with his unknown bird, and Philip Larkin with his song thrush in a chilly spring garden, but we need to remake, remake, remake, not just rely on the poems of the past, we need to do it ourselves — proclaim these worths through our own experiences in the coming century of destruction, and proclaim them loudly, as the reason why nature must not go down.

Illustration by Matthew Forsythe from *The Gold Leaf*

That most unquantifiable, most precious value of nature to human life, McCarthy insists, is the gift nestled in the responsibility — the gift of joy. He writes:

Joy has a component, if not of morality, then at least of seriousness. It signifies a happiness which is a serious business. And it seems to me the wholly appropriate name for the sudden passionate happiness which the natural world can occasionally trigger in us, which may well be the most serious business of all.

Echoing Denise Levertov’s stirring poem about our ambivalent relationship to nature — “We call it ‘Nature’; only reluctantly admitting ourselves to be ‘Nature’ too.” — McCarthy extends a promissory vision for reclaiming our joyous belonging to the natural world:

The natural world is not separate from us, it is part of us. It is as much a part of us as our capacity for language; we are bonded to it still, however hard it may be to perceive the union in the tumult of modern urban life. Yet the union can be found, the union of ourselves and nature, in the joy which nature can spark and fire in us.

A mighty kindling for that fire is what McCarthy offers in the remainder *The Moth Snowstorm* — a beautiful and catalytic read in its entirety. Complement it with evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis on the interconnectedness of nature and Loren Eiseley — one of the most elegant thinkers and underappreciated geniuses of the past century — on how nature can help us reclaim our sense of the miraculous in a mechanical age, then savor Krista Tippett's beautiful *On Being* conversation with McCarthy:

On Being Studios · Nature, Joy, and Human Becoming