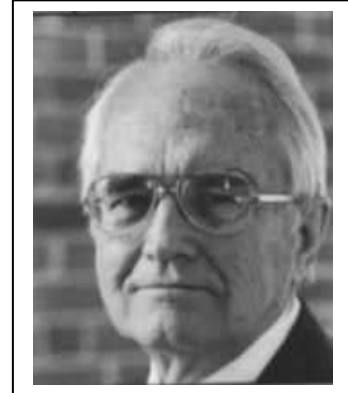


THE NATURE OF  
RELIGION:  
REFLECTIONS OF  
JONATHAN  
AND  
JOSEPH



A sermon by Jim Fisher delivered on February 29, 2004

**OPENING WORDS:**

**Peace of the Woods**

By Margaret Fisher

Soft breezes brush my face and blow my hair.  
They purify my body and my mind.  
Forgotten are the glare and noisy grind  
Of crowded, smoky streets and thoroughfare.  
A chipmunk scuffles from his secret lair  
With chirping chatter as he seeks to find  
Some nuts and berries, seeds of any kind,  
Then hurries back to store his winter's fare.  
The chickadee darts lightly through the trees  
Whose softly swaying branches whisper, "Peace."  
Inhale the fragrance of the gentle breeze;  
Immerse yourself in nature's fair increase.  
Within this gentle woodland take your ease  
And give your tethered heart and soul release.

**PRAYER**

Jonathan Fisher Scripture Animals "The Bee" (p. 38)

In smiling days, and sunny hours,  
The busy Bee from vernal flowers  
Sips nectar sweet; and well supplies  
His feet with paste, a fragrant prize.

Thus fraught with Flora's balmy stores,  
On humming wines away he soars,  
Unerring brings his treasure home,  
And well secures it in his dome.

Soon to the field again he hies,  
 From flower to flower, industrious, flies;  
 And thus in Summer's favoring light  
 Prepare for Winter's dreary night.

Hence learn, my youthful friends, to weigh,  
 And fix the worth of every day;  
 In life's fair prime your stores increase,  
 That hoary age may pass in peace.

Remember death's cold Winter too,  
 And keep the Spring of heaven in view;  
 With stores of faith and love prepare  
 The bliss of heavenly Spring to share.

## READINGS

### 1. "Religion and Nature" in Living Religion by Margaret and Joseph Fisher

But it's my summer inspiration place I want to describe more fully. Located in eastern Maine—way "Down East"—a few miles in from the coast, it takes about half an hour to hike there from our camp. There is a small pond formed by a beaver dam across a stream, just beyond a height of land so that one comes upon it suddenly. Mountains and rock ledges rise around it leaving only room for the pond and an ample supply of willows and aspen, soft enough for the beavers to gnaw down easily and slide to the water. The beaver lodge, igloo-shaped and well constructed, is at the more protected side of the pond about five rods from the dam (people still reckon distance down there in five half-yard rods.) A few pines too big for the beavers to take down and a few maples too hard for their teeth, provide shade here and there. Blueberry and raspberry bushes have come in plentifully in the parts recently cut over by the beavers. The berries go well with a drink of the cool, fresh water scooped up from one of the pools just above the pond formed as the stream makes its last cascade into the still water.

Without question, the beaver's pond is also my pond. Whether the beaver receives inspiration there, I don't know. I do know that I do. Without question also, being at our pond, the beaver's and mine, is a religious experience for me, a living religious experience in which I am an integral part of nature around me and in me, in tune with its vibrations of sound, its spectrum of colors, its flow of sensations. It is a transcendental experience, not in carrying me out of nature, but in intensifying the feeling of oneness with nature. It is a mystical experience, not of being out of the real world, but of being completely and unselfconsciously in it.

### 2. From the Journals of Jonathan Fisher

October 11—12, 1799: "Had a sheep killed by a bear - made a hear trap. Wrote upon sermons."

## THE SERMON

Our children have taken this year to explore their connection with nature. There are many paths to understanding this relationship. As a Unitarian-Universalist child of the 1960s, the son of a resource economist, my father, and a poet-artist, my mother, I was surrounded by paths.

My first path to understanding and probably everybody's first path was direct experience. A newborn feeling sunshine on his face, crawling across a green lawn, my first bee sting, the glorious moment when I reached the top of Bald Mountain and looked back on the sweep of forest and water we just traversed, all played a part in my cognitive wiring.

Art, including painting, music, creative writing, dance, sculpture, and so on, is a path to understanding. My mother, whose poem "Peace of the Woods" I read earlier, managed to cordon-off Fridays from the tumult of raising seven children to paint vivid watercolors mostly depicting natural landscapes and people she knew and loved. Our house was an art gallery of her water color paintings. One winter I took inventory of our house and counted 63 potted plants, a testimony to her inspiration.

My father illuminated a different path to understanding my connection with nature, through science. Here I will take liberties and allow my profession, "social science", to bask in the credibility of the "hard sciences". The scientific process in either case is that of deriving hypotheses from theory and testing hypotheses through measurement and experimentation. In science as in experiential learning and the act of artistic creation, the process is the path. But, how does a resource economist light a path for his children to find their connection with nature? Experience and art are clear enough, but just try discussing diminishing marginal utility of a fourth cookie with your 7 year old.

Other paths were not so apparent to me. Some were obscured by their distance from where I stood and others looked very steep and rocky. I am probably not the only person here today who ducked organic chemistry and there-by sealed my fate not to be a medical doctor.

Upon moving to Blue Hill four years ago, I became acquainted with the Jonathan Fisher House, built in the late 1700's by Blue Hill's first Congregational Minister and by remarkable coincidence an ancestor in a long line of Fishers. My rapid absorption and subsequent time serving on the board of directors for the Fisher House has illuminated another path, that of interpretation through the lens of Judeo-Christian history and belief. I think that a rigorous course of bible studies is more daunting to me than that dreaded course in organic chemistry. Bear with me as I raise questions that I cannot answer.

How do religion and spirituality shape our connection to nature? Or is it the other way around? That is, how does nature shape our connection to spirituality and religion? Perhaps we should ask how does spirituality shape our connection between nature and religion? This is not a situation where my inner social scientist can easily assign cause and effect. I cannot subject these questions to statistical analysis and I do not have a Power-point presentation to highlight

the findings.

Consider, then, two cases for our spiritual connection to nature, the lessons of Jonathan and Joseph.

Jonathan Fisher, born in New Braintree, Massachusetts in 1768, graduated from Harvard College in 1795 majoring in liberal arts and divinity. He declined a choice parish in Massachusetts opting instead to become the first settled minister in Blue Hill in 1796. His starting salary of \$200 per year was augmented by help building a home, 15 cords of firewood, a barn, and five acres of cleared land.

I believe that Jonathan Fisher chose Blue Hill in part because this small, frontier town suited his many talents. He served as minister to his Church forty years, retiring in 1837 with a pension of \$2 per week. During this time he published several small books of sermons and poetry, his major work Scripture Animals, numerous prints made from his hand carved wood blocks, hundreds of pages of journals, sermons, and letters (which he carefully copied by hand). He designed and built his home, grew much of his own food, worked as a land surveyor, built and repaired furniture, braided straw hats, painted portraits, landscapes and architecture, taught Latin, Greek and Hebrew to students who boarded in his home, concocted medicinal remedies which he prescribed and sold, and walked unimaginable distances. In one account he walked 130 miles to Robbinston, near Calais, for the installation of a new minister. He often walked to Bangor in his unflagging effort to create the Bangor Theological Seminary. You are invited to join in a re-creation of that walk on April 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. See me after the service.

I illustrated Jonathan Fisher's close observation of nature reading about the wasp to our children from his book Scripture Animals. He took great interest in close observation of nature. And now, the rest of the story. Jonathan went on to write,

“From these sketches we may learn that it is a vain thing to think of fighting against God; when it is needful for the safety of those, who trust in him, he can, by means of feeble insects, defeat the most powerful armies. We should learn also both to fear and to trust the power of God, who never wants for expedients, either for the destruction of his enemies, or for the protection of his friends.”

Jonathan Fisher's Calvinist message is manifest in his many sermons on the “pangs of Hell” and Apostle Paul on justification by faith (Chase). He occasionally departed from these dark and increasingly unpopular themes to consider nature in a more forgiving light. Reflecting up on Psalms 104, he wrote

“This proof of his generous benevolence calls loudly upon man to feel an interest in the happiness of all living creatures. For if the happiness of the animals is not beneath the notice and care of God, surely man ought not to be too proud or too indifferent to notice and to care for them. It is a mark also of the goodness of God that he has provided abundant means by which man's mind may be fed with knowledge. He has raised up from time to time men of understanding, who have written upon interesting subjects, such as insects, birds, and beasts, so that the minds of children and men may be stored with that information and so that their hearts may be interested and enlightened and their happiness refined and greatly exalted. For these gifts, my dear hearers, man has surely reason to love and to praise God.” (Jonathan Fisher, cited

in Chase, p. 121)

Jonathan Fisher devoted his professional life to religion. He was deeply concerned with the “saving truth”, that truth which would save people’s souls and provide them with an eternity of happiness. Yet, he clearly loved mathematics and science. He devoted long hours to observing nature, recording details such as the construction of hornets nests. His keen observation of the natural environment, his delight in walking long distances, his art and poetry often seem at odds with his sermons of sin and damnation.

Joseph Fisher, born a Unitarian in 1914 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, graduated from Bowdoin and Harvard, served in the army in the South Pacific before completing a doctorate in economics. He served on the Presidents Council of Economic Advisors and rose to be President of Resources for the Future, an environmental think tank. In 1975 he won an upset election for Virginia’s 10<sup>th</sup> Congressional District and as a member of Congress authored economic and environmental policies including parts of the landmark Superfund legislation. He maintained his commitment to Unitarian-Universalism throughout this time, teaching religious education, encouraging the expansion of the Arlington Church, and serving for 12 years as UU moderator for the national general assembly, the highest lay position in the church. Through the 1970s and 1980s Joseph and Peggy Fisher delivered 31 sermons and poetry readings to Unitarian Churches in which they articulated a life time of work to connect religion to life. These sermons and poems were published in Living Religion shortly after he passed away.

My opening reading, from “Inspiration from a Pond”, describes one experience of nature by a beaver pond just above Tunk Lake. He wrote “It is a transcendental experience, not in carrying me out of nature, but in intensifying the feeling of oneness with nature. It is a mystical experience, not of being out of the real world, but of being completely and unselfconsciously in it.”

Joseph Fisher’s career was devoted to science and public policy. He was dedicated to expanding our knowledge of man’s impact on nature and the dire need for us to conserve and protect this planet. Yet, as the field of resource economics gained a strong foothold in academics and public policy, and took on many of the quantitative trappings of “hard science”, he came to question whether this methodology-driven approach would provide us with a basis for making right choices.

In “Inspiration from a Pond” (Religion and Nature) he writes, “My quarrel is not with the effort of science to understand nature or the effort to industry to produce useful articles. My quarrel is with the presumption that nature—forests, animals, water, the landscape, the air around us-- is to be used, misused, even ravaged with little or no thought of humanity’s or nature’s future. When it comes to deciding what to do with the natural environment and natural resources, we fall short. Engineering efficiency is not an adequate guide, nor are economic comparisons of benefits and costs or political and administrative feasibility tests. As a guide, even ecological stability falls short unless it includes the needs and aspirations of human beings as well as ecological systems, whether they are small, like the beaver pond, or large like the world’s oceans and atmosphere. What is needed, of course, are broad and long-range ethical guidelines within which industry and politics can do their work.”

Thus we have two scholars with seemingly little in common other than ancestry, a name and the neighborhood of Boston. Jonathan Fisher was chased out of Cambridge by liberal religious thought, and professed at the end of his career that the pursuers were drawing near. Mary Ellen Chase Jonathan Fisher: Maine Parson wrote “Within the village there are 7 Methodists; and, he

is deeply sorry to say, there is indisputable proof that Arminianism, yea, even Universalism, Unitarianism and Deism have their dangerous, deluded, and imperiled followers even among the members of his own flock.” (Chase, p. 263) Jonathan’s lessons of sin and damnation have faded over time, but his lessons of love of nature, rugged self-reliance and the importance of nurturing our children live on.

Joseph Fisher was, in a sense, chased out of politics by a conservative political wave, the Reagan revolution. Many of the environmental policies that he advocated were swept away by a tide of environmental short-sightedness. We are still faced with mounting environmental crises. We have unsustainable world population growth, rapid depletion of fossil fuels by industrial nations and the resulting build-up of carbon and sulfur in our atmosphere. The fuel efficiency standards Joseph helped to author have been subverted by loopholes exempting gas-guzzling SUVs, and the political will fix these mistakes has been entirely lacking. Yet his efforts to build the field of resource economics and his conviction that we need an environmental ethic have found fertile soil and will grow.

Jonathan’s experience of nature was multifaceted, including art, science, history and his “saving truth”. I suspect that he wrestled through life with a paradox that his very conservative religious philosophy was inadequate to explaining his observations of nature.

Joseph recognized that his profession, resource economics, was necessary, but not sufficient as a guide for decision-making. He sought a larger ethical philosophy, born of a transcendental connection between people and nature.

So, how do we connect spirituality, religion and nature?

Some events focus our thoughts around our connection to nature. Births and deaths come to mind. Jonathan dwelt on the “saving truth” that would give believers ever-lasting happiness, or lacking this an eternity of torment.

Joseph brings to mind a very different connection. “I think the imagery is wrong. Death is not a wall at which one arrives frustrated and defeated, wondering how to get over or past it into new, lush fields. Rather it is a slowing down, a loss of momentum, a fading out like a road in the woods that gradually stops being a road or even a trail. The end, death, creeping in like the silent fog, is usually a gradual loss of separate identity, a merging back again with nature just as our forebears have done. There is nothing to get past or over, it is ending by absorption: the forest, the earth, the air, the universe simply gathering in their own. When death is sudden, as it sometimes is, the same gathering in takes place, only more quickly; what is gathered in is not so much the death and the last moments of life but the whole life itself from its beginning in the cradle through its growing up and its maturity—a gathering in of the whole life and its total effect.” (Religion and Nature “On Endings and Beginnings”)

I recall twenty or so years ago when I read this sermon the image of the road in the woods brought to mind Piper Highway, a dirt track that runs along the side of Tunk Lake. That road disappears into the forest very near to the beaver pond. On a family outing last summer my wife and son stepped on a bees nest. My wife, Donna, received multiple stings and soon collapsed in anaphylactic shock. My son and I ran two miles to the car, brought her back from the dirt track to the highway and on to the hospital where she recovered. The near death experience on that road, that place where life is absorbed back into nature precipitated by the venomous attack of bees put all of these pieces together, but I’m afraid that I cannot draw any conclusions. I resist the notion the bee constituted a divine intervention. I was not about to concede that it was time for the sum of her life to be merged back into the earth. This was a shattering experience, particularly for Donna, but also an opportunity to reflect.

Our children's exploration of their connection to nature this year has been guided by a cadre of adults in our church that have taken time to illuminate pathways to learning. I do not doubt that the sledding trip last Sunday, the lessons in art and music, the days they have collected litter along the Union River, and the trips to the nursing home all contributed to their appreciation of the paths that they may take.

They, we, will need science, art and religion. We will need Jonathan. We will need Joseph.

### **Offeratory**

Keeper of conscience  
Of those of us with plenty  
Or at least enough:

Remind us of the condition  
Of those who are poor  
In worldly goods or in spirit

That we will offer to help  
In a generous and sustaining way  
as befits a religious community.

We will now accept the offering

### **CLOSING WORDS**

God of the winds, God of the rain;  
God of the Stars, God of the Green buds;  
God of nature, God of all:  
Guide us to this place  
Where inspiration may be found  
To renew our earth  
And with it, us.