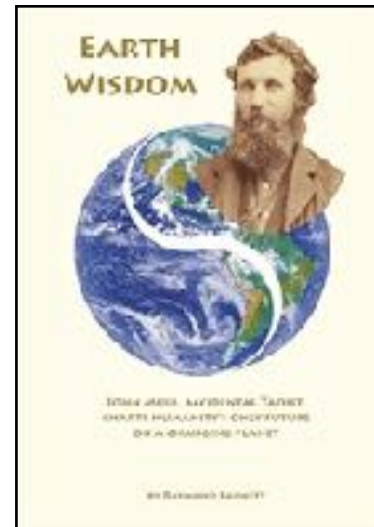


The Earth Wisdom of John Muir

A presentation reviewing the book
*Earth Wisdom: John Muir, Accidental Taoist, Charts Humanity's
Only Future on a Changing Planet*
by Raymond Barnett (CreateSpace, 2016).

Presented by Harold Wood, Sunday, April 8, 2018.
to the
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia



Chalice Lighting:

“Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and; tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love.”

- John Muir, in John of the Mountains (1938, reprinted 1979)

Reading:

“The world, we are told, was made especially for man - a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves. They have precise dogmatic insight into the intentions of the Creator, and it is hardly possible to be guilty of irreverence in speaking of their God any more than of heathen idols. He is regarded as a civilized, law-abiding gentlemen in favor either of a republican form of government or of a limited monarchy; believes in the literature and language of England; is a warm supporter of the English constitution and Sunday schools and missionary societies; and is as purely a manufactured article as any puppet at a half- penny theater.

“With such views of the Creator it is, of course, not surprising that erroneous views should be entertained of the creation.

“Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit - the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

“From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals.... This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.”

- John Muir in [A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf](#) (1916)

Presentation:

The author of this book is Dr. Raymond Barnett, who retired in 2008 after a 32 year career as an evolutionary biology professor at CSU Chico. In addition to his Ph.d in Zoology, Dr. Barnett has a degree in Chinese History, studied for a year at the Union Theological Seminary, and has studied Chinese language and history for many years. He has traveled widely in China, and along with several historical novels about China, he is the author of a previous book, *Relax, You're Already Home*, a popular introduction to Taoism. Interestingly, that book is not really about philosophical Taoism taken from books, but focuses how to cultivate Taoist habits that the Chinese people have proved to be a helpful way of life for over 5,000 years. His analysis was based on Dr. Barnett's on-the-ground meeting the people of China, and witnessing Taoist practices in sacred sites, like mountains.

This particular amazing book, *The Earth Wisdom of John Muir*, in 3 main parts, is actually a combination of 4 books in one: (1) a biography, (2) a religious exegesis, (3) a history of the environmental movement, and (4) a Blueprint for Human Survival. The book is ambitious, but it seamlessly blends these seeming disparate components of history, biography, philosophy, and futurism into a highly persuasive argument for an entirely new approach to humanity's life on Planet Earth. In this book, Dr. Barnett asserts that Muir's "Earth Wisdom" offers us a path - as individuals and as a society - to becoming whole and enlivened by connecting with our roots in the natural world.

While not without its share of “doom and gloom” about the scary future of climate change for our species, overall Barnett presents a positive message about how love for the planet and an appreciation for the immanent world view that is common to both Taoist philosophy and modern science can make us whole with the Earth once again. Barnett's thesis is that “Muir's travels and observations engendered an immanent, this-worldly view, which finds ultimate meaning and glory in the natural world itself, in its physical array of creatures, elements, and processes—which included spirituality, beauty, and love.”

Part One, “Muir's Rambles & Worldview,” traces John Muir's amazing wilderness adventures and explores the worldview that sprang from them. At the heart of this recounting of adventures is our discovery of Muir's opposition to anthropocentrism and his embracing of the

immanent view of the sacred. Barnett labels Muir's world-view "Earth Wisdom" and states that most mainstream accounts of John Muir neglect this crucial aspect of Muir's philosophy.

For this section, Dr. Barnett quotes extensively from Muir's thoughts written in his private journals, not found in his mainstream publications, some of which we have already heard in the reading for this morning.

Part Two, "The Tao of Muir," outlines some basic principles of the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism, including some resources other than the *Daodejing* (popularly better known in the West by its old spelling, *Tao the Ching*) that are less known by westerners. This section concludes that Muir's "Earth Wisdom" is highly congruent with what Dr. Barnett identifies as the three pillars of Taoism.

The 3 pillars, in Barnett's language are as follows:

1st. "*This world is our true home.*" This means a view that not merely rejects the idea of an after-life, but which actually embraces death as a crucial phenomenon allowing for the epic of evolution to proceed. John Muir commented about death in a positive way: "Birds, insects, bears die as cleanly and are disposed of as beautifully as flies. The woods are full of dead and dying trees, yet needed for their beauty to complete the beauty of the living.... How beautiful is all Death! " Muir here seems to appreciate that for evolution to proceed, current living things must make way for future living beings. The Taoist philosophers were in accord: Taoist sage Zhuangzi says: "Life arises from death, and death from life." Elsewhere, this sage advises a cripple who has just been rebuffed by a clueless Confucius, "Why don't you simply make him (Confucius) see that life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides—and thus free him from his cuffs and fetters?"

The 2nd pillar is *kinship with all creatures*. Dr. Barnett explains: "The second pillar of the immanent view of Earth Wisdom and Taoism recognizes that in this world, humans are intimately related to every other living creature, and join other creatures in fully participating in the grand cycles of earthly existence. This second pillar may be described as a kinship view of human life: we are kin to all other life forms, and they to us. The corollary to kinship, of course, is that humans are nothing extraordinary." Taoist sage Zhuangzi said:

"You were born in a human form, and you find joy in it. Yet there are ten thousand other forms endlessly transforming that are equally good, and the joy in these is untold."

Muir expressed this same idea equally clearly, when he wrote,

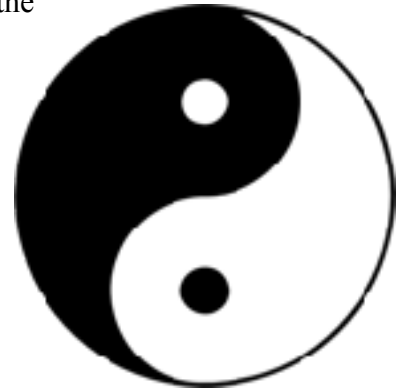
"Now, it never seems to occur to these far- seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one."

To emphasize his point, he wrote,

“I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears.”

Thus, Muir, like the Taoists, forthrightly rejects the anthropocentric view that is still dominant in our world today.

3rd: The third pillar of the immanent worldview that Muir and the Taoists saw clearly in their sojourns in the world was the way *certain clusters of phenomena work together to produce and support the whole; there is a duality to existence.*” The Taoists visualize this in the model of two interlocking curved shapes - the *taijitu* 太极图 symbol - popularly known in the West as the “Yin-Yang symbol.” A classic example of yin-yang interaction together generating reality is the observation that rocks are solid, with a brutal strength: yang; while water is flowing, with its own subtle strength: yin. This idea is fully developed in the *Tao te Ching* and elsewhere in Chinese Taoist philosophy. As Dr. Barnett notes, this is *not* a pure duality of opposites - “crucially, each of the dual elements has a bit of the other right in the middle of it... Yin and yang are not mutually exclusive or battling with each other; they are not opposites. Rather, everything—including every person—is composed of complementary elements of yin and yang.” Both are valid, both necessary; reality is the balanced interplay between them.



Muir did not create such a full-developed philosophical system as the Taoists, but nonetheless he embraced in his life the principles of complementary aspects of nature. He described the yin and yang interaction of rocks and water in a way evocative of that of the Taoists:

“Vapor from the sea; rain, snow, and ice on the summits; glaciers and rivers—these form a wheel that grinds the mountains thin and sharp, ... and crushes the rocks into soils on which the forests and meadows and gardens are growing.”

Like the *Tao te Ching* says, “Nothing is weaker than water, But when it attacks something hard, or resistant, then nothing withstands it.” Elsewhere, Muir wrote of light and dark, storms and quietude, large and small. He observed:

“Nature is ever at work building and pulling down, creating and destroying, keeping everything whirling and flowing, allowing no rest but in rhythmical motion, chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another.”

Isn't Muir's view of the water cycle describing the “whirling and flowing” of Nature something visually represented so well in the *taijitu* symbol?

Where the Tao celebrates the Male-Female duality, Barnett notes that unlike many 19th century men, John Muir accepted women as equals and friends, and he delighted in playing with small children as much as engaging in discussions with notable scientists and prominent literary men. At that time, “a male treating females and flowers with attention and respect equal to that conferred upon males was highly unusual.”

Barnett summarizes:

“Muir’s 19th century articulation of Earth Wisdom, the three-pillared immanent worldview in the West—earth is our home, we are kin to the rest of creation, and reality is generated by complementary interactions of dualistic phenomena—constitutes his first legacy to the Western world. Others in the West had broached one or another of the three pillars—Heraclitus, St. Francis of Assisi, Alexander von Humboldt, early feminists in England and America—but it was Muir who brought them all together, and introduced them to early modern Western society in his writings, particularly his journals, and his stirring life.”

Comparing many quotes of Muir with that of Taoist sages, Barnett concludes that he “would not claim that Muir’s “God” (or his “Mother Nature”) is neatly synonymous with China’s “Tao,” it seems clear that what Muir is getting at when he uses the various terms examined above is well within the variety of concepts that have been advanced to describe “the Tao.”

Muir was “an accidental Taoist” as he came to his own version of Taoism coincidentally, based on his observations of nature. But this is precisely why the two approaches are so similar — they both result from careful and sustained observations of nature. Dr. Barnett says, “China’s version of the earth-centered, immanent philosophy of life is Taoism; Muir’s version is Earth Wisdom.”

Comparing the two, it soon becomes clear that careful observation of nature is also an approach to another modern world view: Science.

The author, himself a scientist in the field of evolutionary biology as well as being a Chinese scholar, proclaims that both Muir’s “Earth Wisdom” and Taoism offer a critical way of thinking that is also embraced by modern science. He says:

“Here, then, is the secret of the surprising similarity between Muir’s Earth Wisdom and China’s Taoism. The world, upon close and unbiased inspection by whomever is sauntering through it with fully open eyes and a mind free of prior bias, reveals itself in a this-worldly, immanent outlook fundamentally different than the transcendent, other-worldly views of the major religions, East or West.

Part Three of Barnett's book provides a literal Blueprint for Human Survival.

Barnett argues that Muir's "Earth Wisdom" is not just biocentric, but goes even further. Muir broadened his spiritual vision "to include not just plants and animals, but rocks and water as entities also bursting with spiritual life."

Dr. Barnett explains:

"Muir's radical shift of view from anthropocentrism, then, goes beyond biocentrism to include the whole planet. Everything, the entire immanent world, is alive. We may call his view, then, Gaiacentrism, an outlook that decisively dethrones what Muir time and again [sarcastically] refers to as "Lord Man."

This view was not merely philosophy; Muir put the idea into tangible action. Thus, Muir did not merely act to protect plants and animals, but entire mountain ranges, forests, valleys, waterfalls, and rivers.

One of the especially beautiful places he sought to protect was a river and a valley, with its waterfalls and verdant flowery meadows - the Hetch Hetchy Valley, located within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, and so should already have been considered protected. But the City of San Francisco drowned that Valley in 1923, after John Muir and his followers lost a long battle between 1905 and 1912 with the City.

Barnett shares with others the conclusion that the scope, intensity, and tactics of the battle to save Hetch Hetchy created the modern environmental movement, and that John Muir, more than any other single person, marshaled that battle. But after that time, perhaps because that battle was lost, Barnett feels the environmental movement has gone somewhat astray, turning to more practical arguments. While they extolled Muir's first pillar, the wonder and awe of the natural world, they emphasized the benefits to humans of wilderness preservation, and the financial costs to humans of pollution. It is still anthropocentrism, though a more enlightened version of it.

But Barnett argues that we need to return to Muir's original non-anthropocentric world view as one our planet sorely needs as we face the Sixth Extinction crisis and the loss of biodiversity all over the world.

In my mind, one would think that the 1968 NASA "Blue Marble" image of our planet, showing it as one beautiful blue and white globe with no borders, would have, certainly by now, persuaded most people on Earth that we were "one planet, undivided" and need to respect and revere all people and all forms of life. John Muir anticipated this NASA image - and even embraced a cosmic perspective, not just a planetary one, when he wrote:

“When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.”

Barnett says that this global vision of the commonality among all people and all forms of life on earth requires a radical shift not just in thinking, but in our economics, forms of government, and lifestyles.

For this part of the book, Barnett relies heavily on Naomi Klein’s book, *This Changes Everything*.

That book tells the sad story of how in 1988, NASA climatologist James Hansen first sounded the alarm to congress about the problem of global climate change. But little has been done between then and now. International Climate summits in 1992, 1997, and 2009, failed miserably to agree to any binding emissions limits by any country. Then, in 2012, a study by the international accounting and auditing firm Pricewaterhouse-Coopers concluded that the climate studies “mean, quite simply, that climate change has become an existential crisis for the human species.” Clearly the data indicated not just *challenges* to civilization, but its widespread *collapse* around the world as temperatures increased above 2°C, accompanied by horrific death rates from famine and disease, especially in the already-warm equatorial belt. Had meaningful responses to climate change begun to be gradually phased in shortly after the initial 1988 announcement by Hansen, the threat could have been handled relatively easily, and catastrophe averted. Three decades of refusal to seriously address the issue, however, had presented humanity by 2012 with a very different scenario. Dr. Barnett shows that this was primarily to the very successful efforts of Big Oil, Big Coal, the Heartland Institute. What was now required to avert the specter of civilization’s collapse on the planet was wrenching change focused into a short window of time.

So what have we gotten? The United Nations Conference on environment in Paris in 2015 resulted, for the first time, an agreement to address human caused climate change. However, none of the provisions of the agreement were legally binding, and its goals would still allow for a 3 percent increase in global temperature, well above the 2 percent that scientists believe is necessary. Any thought of a tax or fee on carbon was studiously avoided. This is despite the fact that not only numerous scientists, but even major economists, including agencies like the World Bank, believe that the affects of climate change will be - and I quote - “widespread drought, famine, severe-weather episodes, flooding of coastal areas, and creation of climate refugees in the hundreds of millions, which will together bring about the death of millions of people.”

What we are talking about here is inter-generational justice - or the lack thereof.

As Bill McKibben writes, in the face of such a threat, we should immediately stop drilling, coal mining, and fracking for fossil fuels - anywhere - and to start immediately building solar panels and windmills at a breakneck pace all over the world.”

In a study released during Earth Day in 2015, a group of leading scientists and economists said that we truly need to go even further: “Three-quarters of known fossil fuel reserves must be kept in the ground if humanity is to avoid the worst effects of climate change.”

But what has happened instead? The United States has opted out of even this limited Paris Agreement, and the Trump White House is moving swiftly in precisely the opposite direction, to rapidly open up even formerly protected public lands to expanded oil drilling, throughout the West, and even in the critical caribou habitat of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, not to mention the continental shelf on both coasts.

In Barnett’s view, “The crushing inertia of a world view solidly based on the notion that humans are the center of the world, superior to other life forms and not constrained by the laws governing the rest of life, is relentlessly preventing the necessary urgent responses to climate change.”

To change the world we need some big ideas, and a big change in world view.

Barnett argues for adoption by society at large of a new world view based on the 3 pillars of John Muir’s Earth Wisdom. These 3 pillars he sees as being not limited to governmental action, but also can be implemented within capitalism with an entrepreneurial spirit, and within both secular organizations like environmental groups, and also within religion. He sees hopeful signs for these in all these institutions. Barnett spends some time addressing how his 3 pillars can be better integrated into each of these various institutions, and especially in the world’s various religions. He finds hopeful signs in the recent messages of Pope Francis, as well as other recent religious efforts to address climate change.

Dr. Barnett’s 3 pillars all relate to John Muir’s Earth Wisdom, which, as we have seen, is congruent with both ancient Taoist philosophy and simultaneously with modern scientific thinking.

His prescription to help humanity survive the coming challenges of climate change is a simple three fold expression:

“First, more Earth, living here and now;
Less Heaven, living the future and elsewhere.

Second: More Kinship with all earth’s creatures;
Less Human superiority and focus.

Third: More Yin traits expressed;
Less Yang dominance.

(More cooperation, acceptance, nurturing, and feminine ; less competition, dominance, destruction and masculine.”

Barnett’s book *Earth Wisdom* makes an excellent case for the best path we can take to live in harmony with the earth. Let’s find ways to apply the three pillars from three sources - from the wisdom of John Muir, from Taoism, and from science. If we do that, we can make a better world for not only ourselves but for future generations and for all living things - and the rocks and clouds and the interconnecting cycles of water and carbon and oxygen and nitrogen upon which our Earth revolves.

I would like to end with a final quote from Muir biographer Linnie Marsh Wolfe, summarizing the way John Muir saw the world:

“Man must be made conscious of his origin as a child of Nature. Brought into right relationship with the wilderness he would see that he was not a separate entity endowed with a divine right to subdue his fellow creatures and destroy the common heritage, but rather an integral part of a harmonious whole. He would see that his appropriation of earth's resources beyond his personal needs would only bring imbalance and beget ultimate loss and poverty for all. “

Benediction:

“One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of Nature -- inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.”

- John Muir, in [My First Summer in the Sierra](#) (1911).

[Raymond Barrett Website](#)

[Reviews and Introduction](#)

[Radio Interview of Raymond Barnett](#) - scroll down to 21 FEBRUARY 2017 -
EARTH WISDOM: JOHN MUIR AND TAOISM - Ecotopia # 406, KZPR.

[Book Cover Jacket on John Muir Exhibit website](#)

John Muir (1838- 1914)

John Muir has been described as "one of the patron saints of twentieth-century American environmental activity," "the wilderness prophet," and "the citizen of the universe." He once jokingly referred to himself as a "poetico-trampo-geologist-botanist and ornithologist-naturalist etc. etc.!"

But, for many of us who are aware of his triumphs in conservation, Muir is —quite simply— a hero.

John Muir was born April 21, 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, but his family emigrated to Portage, Wisconsin when he was 11 years old. Even at a young age, Muir was completely enamored by all things nature and it was at the University of Wisconsin, where he attended his first botany class, that his lifelong passion for the sciences was sparked. After his formal schooling, the flame continued to burn and Muir chose to embark on "the study of the inventions of God" in the "university of the wilderness."



He traveled throughout North America by foot, before settling into his life-long home, California. All the while, Muir kept written records and sketches of the natural beauty he encountered along the way. His only set of directions? The "wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way [he] could find."

He was a deeply spiritual man and a very gifted writer. His passionate and eloquently-presented thoughts about environmental issues, conveyed through his written works, helped to push forward conservation efforts and contribute to over 80 million acres being set aside today as national parklands.

Muir's strides in conservation began during a critical turning point in time for America: the Industrial Revolution—a time when there was a dire need for society to realize that if it kept going in the direction it was headed, the natural environment would have certainly suffered.

- By Krishun Karau, Park Stewardship Intern
From *Park E-ventures*, May 2013