
John Denver: A Missionary of Pantheism

by Bernie Zaleha

Editor's note: With his ardent and steadfast love of Nature, singer-songwriter John Denver (born Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr.) became identified as "The Poet for the Planet." His music inspired a generation of activists to preserve and protect Nature. Our UPS Board member Bernie Zaleha calls Denver "a missionary of Pantheism." His article here explains why.



John Denver was "an eco-aware pantheist" who was, according to *Newsweek* in 1976, "the most popular pop singer in America." Four years earlier, in September 1972, Denver released his album *Rocky Mountain High*, whose title track was an autobiographical paean to the glories of Nature that in March 1973 made it to number nine on Billboard's Hot 100 list. On March 12, 2007, the song became Colorado's second state song. In this autobiographical song, which was inspired by watching the Perseid meteor shower on a dark night in the Rocky Mountains, Denver describes himself as someone who, in "his 27th year," was, invoking Christian imagery, "born again" through his transforming encounters with Nature and thereby came "home to a place he'd never been before." After this epiphany, Denver tells his listeners, speaking about himself in the third person,

*Now he walks in quiet solitude the forest and the streams
Seeking grace in every step he takes
His sight has turned inside himself to try and understand
The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake*

As a result of this inward meditation, Denver can, through Nature, "talk to God and listen to the casual reply." However, the song tells further that this new intimacy with God through Nature comes with a price:

*Now his life is full of wonder but his heart still knows some fear
Of a simple thing he cannot comprehend
Why they try to tear the mountains down to bring in a couple more
More people more scars upon the land*

Though he now knows "he'd be a poorer man if he never saw an eagle fly," this new intimacy with sacred Nature had attached to it a new concern for the fate of the environment. Denver could no longer be indifferent to the fate of creation. "Rocky Mountain High" was the first song on the album. With his song, "Season Suite: Spring," he concluded that album with a rapturous hymn of connection to Nature:

*Open up your eyes and see the brand new day,
A clear blue sky and brightly shining sun.*

*Open up your mind and let the light shine in
The earth has been reborn and life goes on
And do you care what's happening around you?
Do your senses know the changes when they come?
Can you see yourself reflected in the seasons?
Can you understand the need to carry on?*

*And oh, I love the life within me
I feel a part of everything I see
And oh, I love the life around me
A part of everything is here in me*

continued on next page

John Denver *continued from page 5*

Over the remaining 25 years of his career, cut short by his death in a plane crash on October 12, 1997, Denver continued to explore nature-centered understandings of the sacred. In his album *Spirit*, released in August 1976, he included a song with strong pantheistic elements entitled “The Wings That Fly Us Home,” wherein Denver tells his listening public that he knows “*that love is seeing all the infinite in one,*” and that “*You’re never alone*” because:

*And the spirit fills the darkness of the heavens
It fills the endless yearning of the soul
It lives within a star too far to dream of
It lives within each part and is the whole*

In November 1977, Denver released his album, *I Want To Live*, which included his song, “Singing Skies and Dancing Waters,” describing the lament of someone, perhaps himself, struggling with the loss of faith in a traditional god. The despairing seeker in the song laments to God, “*I just couldn’t see you, I thought that I’d lost you/ I never felt so much alone/ Are you still with me?*” God responds to the seeker’s plea, explaining, “*I’m with you in singing skies and dancing waters/ Laughing children, growing old/ And in the heart/ And in the spirit/ And in the truth when it is told.*”

The same album included “To the Wild Country,” in which Denver recounts that when he is feeling down in the city where “*There’s nothing wild as far as I can see ... Then my heart turns to Alaska/ And freedom on the run/ I can hear her spirit calling me/ To the mountains, I can rest there/ To the rivers, I will be strong/ To the forests, I’ll find peace there/ To the wild country, where I belong.*” The song ends with a plea to preserve the wild country, despite “mankind marching on.”

In the title track of his September 1983 album, *It’s About Time*, Denver tells his audience that “*It’s about time we start to see it/ The Earth is our only home/ It’s about time we start to face it we can’t make it here all alone*” without the rest of Earth’s family of creatures. Then, in his song “Children of the Universe,” from his 1982 *Seasons of the Heart* album, Denver describes reality in this way:

*The cosmic ocean knows no bounds
For all that live are brothers
The whippoorwill, the grizzly bear
The elephant, the whale
All children of the universe
All weavers of the tale*

In his song “Raven’s Child,” from his 1990 albums *Earth Songs* and *The Flower That Shattered the Stone*, after describing various human kings (drug kings, oil baron kings, arms dealer kings (complete with a reference to Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars missile shield) who all sit on an “*arrogant throne, away, and above, and apart,*” Denver invokes biblical language of God as King, but this pantheistic “*true King sits on a heavenly throne/ Never away, nor above, nor apart/ With wisdom and mercy/ And constant compassion/ He lives in the love/ That lives in our hearts.*”

As a final example of Denver’s pantheistic lyrics, I’ll conclude with this from the title track of his *The Flower That Shattered The Stone* album: “*The Earth is our mother just turning around/ With her trees in the forest and roots underground/ Our father above us whose sigh is the wind/ Paint us a rainbow without any end.*” Here, Denver uses the Amerindian imagery of Mother Earth and Father Sky to understand the divine as immanent within the Cosmos, and to recognize “*In the infinite and beauty we’re all joined in one.*”

John Denver continues to impact American - even global - culture. He is greatly missed by legions of people around the world.

