

Christian reflections on the Book of Nature

By Mack Swenson and Tom Cordaro

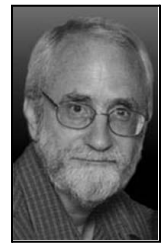
Pax Christi USA Peace Pairs

April 2026



Mack Swenson: *I recently graduated from Drake University in Des Moines with degrees in journalism and environmental sustainability. Right now, I'm working behind the scenes at Local 5 News, also in Des Moines. Outside of my formal work, I've also edited the Via Pacis, the Des Moines Catholic Worker's newspaper, for about 1.5 years. At 23 years old, I often find myself tangled in questions at the intersection of faith, morality, and the environment. What follows is a written dialogue between myself and Tom; we met as Peace Pairs last fall. We wanted this dialogue to flow with minimal structure, and as such, we re-tangled more of my questions than we untangled. I hope you can take something away from our discussion.*

Tom Cordaro, Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace: *I have participated in and helped organize movements for social justice and peace since 1978, and began my relationship with Pax Christi USA in the late 1980s. I've been a member of Pax Christi local groups, regional leadership communities, the national staff, national council, and the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team.*



Tom and Mack's discussion centers around the concept of the "Book of Nature"; in her book [The Astonishing Beauty of God's First Sacred Text: The Book of Nature](#), Barbara Mahany writes: "One of the first bibliographers to put a name to the Book of Nature was Anthony the Great, a third-century Egyptian Desert Father, who when asked by a curious visitor how he managed to be so learned with nary a book on the shelf, replied, 'My book is the nature of creating things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand.' Theophan the Recluse, the 19th-century Russian Orthodox saint, declared creation a 'holy book filled with uncountable and wonderfully different paragraphs.'"

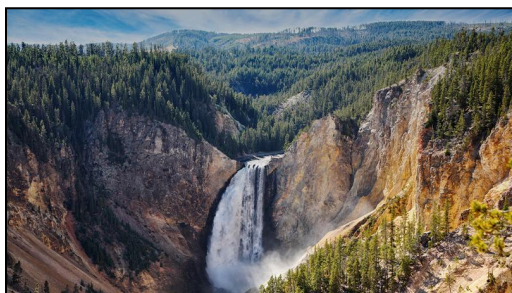
MACK: I often find myself trying to picture the world as a giant clock, even though I believe the mystery of life's complexity to be sacred. It seems to me that science often approaches the world as a clock to be dissected and studied, though many scientists I know – especially those in the natural sciences – also express a great deal of wonder during their studies.

As the leaves have molted into vibrancy these past few weeks, I've often found myself struck with wonder. At its most basic, wonder is a form of praise – a collection of feelings inspired by

God's creation. I've noticed that environmental phenomena that instill this wonderful collection of feelings are more likely to be respected and preserved. We've developed a whole *system* to rank perceived natural wonder; "minimally" spectacular environmental phenomena become county or city parks, while the "best" natural beauties earn national park status. I usually agree with these aesthetic rankings; national parks just tend to instill more wonder in me than the park down the street. But if I closely observe the minutiae of local parks, I often find things that instill a great deal of wonder – whether it's equal to that I experience at national parks, I can't say. Our rigid ranking system seems to discourage appreciation of environmental minutiae, and prompting wonder could move the needle toward greater respect for all parts of the environment. Have you or activists you know ever tried to instill wonder to inspire environmental protection? How do you feel about the national park system, and how do you think it could be improved?

TOM: Thank you for your insights, Mack! I especially like your observation about the connection between wonder and praise. I am in awe of the ecosystem I live in. Many would be surprised by this because my ecosystem includes a townhome development in the middle of suburbia. We are blessed with a small retention pond nearby as well as a 10-acre wetland just outside my front door. I have lived here for more than 25 years, and I am still surprised by what I find when I take the time to see. Most people look but do not see.

I am reminded of the observations of eco-theologian Brian Swimme. He noted that by the time a child is five years old, she will have been bombarded with tens of thousands of commercials and can readily identify many corporate logos, recognize product jingles and songs, but cannot identify many of the trees, plants, insects or animals that inhabit their back yards. He lamented that most of us do not live in nature – we live in industrial artifacts. Even our well-manicured housing developments, parks and playgrounds with their native plantings are artificial.



I think that national parks and wilderness areas are essential because they affirm our belief that creation is the first and primary revelation of God. By taking the time to read this "Book of Nature" we can come to know the Creator. But most of us will never visit a national park and those who have, cannot afford to do so regularly. This is why we need to learn to be awed by what little of nature we can access – not just the

lovely, manicured parks and managed state parks and forest preserves, but wild areas that are not managed by humans. These wild areas remind us that we are not in control of creation; we are part of creation.

And I believe that our main task -- our purpose in this web of creation -- is to reflect in wonder at all that God has made. We are the planet come to consciousness. As far as we know, we are the only creatures who can express the “wow!” of our planet. We were made to praise.

MACK: Historically, that “wow!” encourages care. Swimme’s theology suggests that children may be learning to admire the corporate system but not the natural environment that surrounds them. I know many organizations focused on preserving wild spaces often work with children, trying to instill an awe that will last into their adult life. (Corporate appeals, psychology tells us, try much the same thing.) There’s a reason “childlike wonder” carries so much weight. This type of wonder – unfettered by bottom lines, feasibility, or likelihood – carries great power, whether it manifests in mom and dad buying a new toy or long-lasting appreciation of nature.

That said, I think there are many missed opportunities to encourage adults to express childlike wonder. One thing I’ve noticed among Gen Z is that many people simply haven’t been to “wild” places, haven’t been encouraged to look closely at even the manicured or managed nature around them. As I often discuss with my therapist, most people my age are comfortable in specific spheres – online, at school, etc. – but experience a lot of anxiety leaving those safe spaces. I believe creating safe spaces in nature, especially for people who haven’t historically had as many of those spaces – such as people of color and people who live in low-income neighborhoods – is part of our duty as Christians.

TOM: Once again, I admire your insights and wisdom. In response to the excellent points you make, I would like to tell you a story.

Once, while I was resting on a park bench enjoying the early spring weather, my attention was drawn to a young family with twin toddlers. One was running around with no apparent destination in mind, while the other was squatting down with his nose to the ground, utterly amazed at a little twig lying on the sidewalk.

Mom was trying to corral the children by reminding them of the things they needed to do and places they needed to go. In the course of her admonition, she mentioned the need to follow the “schedule.”

Then, one of the children asked, “Mommy, what is a schedule?”

Mom did her best to explain the concept to her child. She said a schedule was a list of things to do and when to do it. Of course, her toddler had only the vaguest notion of chronological time (clock time), but eager to win his mother's approval, he assured her that he understood her answer.

The entire episode left me profoundly sad. I certainly understand the need for parents to teach their children about the importance of scheduling. I saw nothing wrong with how this mother

took advantage of this teachable moment to help her children become responsible members of society.

But I also wondered if this toddler may be taking his first steps to becoming a “responsible adult” ruled by the schedules he creates and those created for him. And when time becomes completely domesticated, properly measured, and transformed into a taskmaster, what will become of the child who ran with ecstatic joy with no apparent destination? What will happen to the child who was enthralled by a small twig lying on the sidewalk? Will they become dutiful cogs in the machine?



Some say this is the price we pay to become adults. “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” (1 Corinthians 13:12). But as I sit on my park bench, a retired 71-year-old man, I wonder if the price paid was too high.

It is more than simply “taking the time” to smell the roses along the pathway of life. It is about the danger of losing the ability to fully live in the moment, not merely to see the world around us but to perceive what one is seeing, to be fully present to all that is.

After a lifetime of schedules, to-do lists, and tutelage under the taskmaster of clock time, I wonder if what I gained was worth all I lost. Now, in the autumn of my life, I long to “see” the world in the same way those twin toddlers “see” the world. I want to run (or walk fast) with no apparent destination, no meeting to attend, no task to accomplish, and no goal to pursue. I want to be amazed by the ordinary; I want to experience everything and everyone as if for the first time, with no preconceived notions.

Hopefully, the toddlers I met at the park will grow up understanding that schedules are useful if they do not come to dominate their lives. And I hope they can maintain the capacity for wonder they had that day when one asked, “Mommy, what is a schedule?”

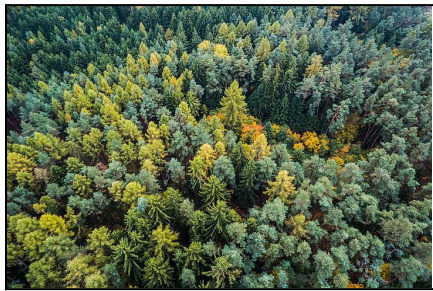
MACK: It’s funny that, when I sat down to write this reflection late last night, I was fretting about not crossing this item off my to-do list. Anyway, it was nearly midnight, and I had just come back from a tough workday, so I decided rest was in my better interest. I dreamt of arriving late to get-togethers and missing deadlines, as I often do.

Part of the reason nature fascinates us, I think, is that it doesn’t exist on our timescale. Perennials come and go, autumn leaves decay and return to the soil, mountains erode into the

landscape and the streams. Besides being downright magnificent, nature reminds us that, most of the time, big things take time. Our achievements are but a blip in the planet's story. In the face of such magnificence, the stress of our to do lists loses some of its poignance.

I think of the twig that fascinated the toddler. To him and to us, it appears unmoving, resisting our schedules and to-do lists. But in time, that twig will decompose, becoming nutrients for the plants of the future. We can hope that, after our deaths, our influence will similarly live on. For now, though, we're exactly where we need to be.

Nature leads by example, demonstrating adaptation to the changing seasons and harmonious living with other beings.



TOM: Thanks again for your insightful reflections. I do believe that the "Book of Nature," the primary revelation of God, has much to teach us if we pay attention. Here in Illinois, we have a wonderful collection of forest preserves that have nurtured me since moving here almost 30 years ago.

One day, after feeling crushed by the on-going suffering and pain of so many people and the on-going assault on all that is good, decent and compassionate in our nation, I went to my favorite forest preserve for some healing. (The Japanese call this forest bathing, or *shinrin-yoku*.)

As I rounded the bend on my familiar walking trail, I was confronted by a vast area of destruction. Almost every plant and tree, as far as the eye can see, was gone! Burn pits were scattered among the scorched acres. I was devastated. The landscape had been so completely destroyed that I began to lose my bearing and feared that I would get lost.

I had forgotten that earlier that year we voted to spend \$75 million on improvements to our forest preserve system. What I was seeing was a reclamation project, meant to restore some of the original prairie and to "manage" the forest. However, on that day, it looked like someone had dropped napalm on the forest.

It was almost a month before I returned to this forest preserve. When I rounded the bend on the walking trail, I was stunned again. Already, new life was breaking through the barren, burnt landscape turning the whole area green. I was totally amazed. And then I remembered a quote from one of the characters in the original Jurassic Park movie, "Life always finds a way." I was filled with hope, not only for the life of this forest, but for our human family. The Book of Nature still has so much to teach me.

I was also fascinated with your reflection on our perception of time. It is hard for us to imagine what impact clock-time had on removing us from the natural world. Before our mechanistic concept of time dominated every aspect of our lives, time was considered sacred.

When time was sacred, humans depended on the lunar and solar cycles to tell them what time it was. The life cycles of plants and animals also taught humans how to order their lives and live in harmony with nature. The stars helped them to not only navigate the planet but also to interpret the “signs of the times.”

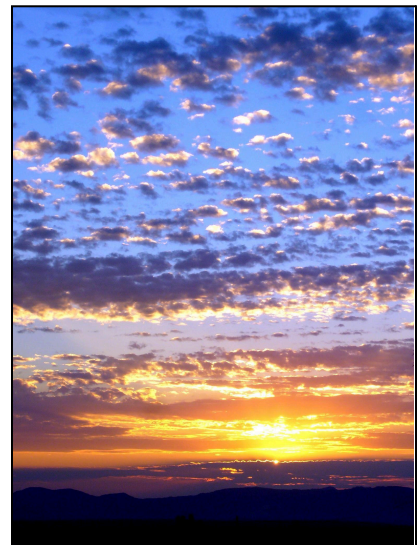
Along with our mechanistic understanding of time, and the rise of the so-called Age of Enlightenment, we began to treat all of creation as a giant clockwork. We did not need the Church or any sense of the sacred to tell us about our world. Newton had unlocked the secrets of the universe. We are now masters of the universe.

This new way of understanding the world drained the sacred from creation. Over time our world has been transformed into nothing more than pre-manufactured consumer goods. Racing from one distraction to another, we became strangers to the world that brought us into being. We have lost touch with the natural rhythms of our living planet as we race to a finish line that never appears.

I need to keep in mind your words of wisdom, “For now, though, we’re exactly where we need to be.” It is easy to become overwhelmed by all those things that mock our hopes.

I want to end this posting with a quote from my favorite rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement, to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

MACK: I love the phrase you referenced, “life finds a way.” It reminds me of a similar phrase I’ve heard throughout my life – from my parents, friends and mentors – “God finds a way.” Sometimes, it rubs me the wrong way. After a letdown, breakup, etc., I want to feel some control over the situation, not surrender my future to a being that doesn’t work on my time.



“Life finds a way” is more abstract; it usually doesn’t irk me like its counterpart. But God *is* life, and God *does* find a way, even if I don’t see it as such. I often feel like you, in the barren forest, unable to recognize the potential of the roots and seeds under my feet, struggling to surrender to the possibilities of an uncertain future.

Yet roots become bushes, and seeds become flowers. Life finds a way – in the month you waited, but also often decades or more. Our lives in service of God are much the same; God doesn’t work in our lives on the “mechanistic” timescale we’ve set forth. In this way, nature – God’s primary revelation, as you’ve called it – reflects God. As life finds a way, so will God. It’s no wonder holy people have found strength in the phrase “God finds a way” throughout history.

Through this lens, thinking about events in the short term actively works against our faith. Surrendering to God is an acceptance of God’s timescale. During these difficult political times, I try to remember to think long-term, and nature is an excellent reminder. Furthermore, reveling in nature takes time, as Heschel said, because observing growth and regrowth on its timescale forces us out of our own.

Fulfillment from living a life of faith is also more powerful than the short-term happiness or grief that comes from human creations that use our timescale, like social media and materialism. Time and time again, we see that God’s creations have more to give us than many of our own.

TOM: Thanks again for your rich reflections. I especially like the way you link the wisdom of the Book of Nature with the way we think about time. Nature has so much to teach us. Lately I have been re-reading the Gospel through the lens of the wisdom of the Book of Nature.



I used to think of Jesus’ frequently used agricultural metaphors—such as sowing seeds, tending vineyards, and harvesting— as a way to make complex spiritual lessons accessible to first-century peasant farmers. While there is truth to this, I am learning that Jesus often referred to the Book of Nature because Jesus understood that nature (the cosmos) is the primary revelation of God.

When Jesus says, in the Sermon on the Mount, “Behold the birds of heaven” and “Consider the lilies of the field,” (Matthew 6:25-29) he was referencing the Book of Nature. When Jesus taught, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit,” (John 12:24) he was not merely using a folksy metaphor, he was pointing his disciples to the wisdom of the Book of Nature.

Of course, Jesus was not the only person in the Bible who made use of the wisdom of the Book of Nature. Isaiah used an image from nature that I think speaks to the existential crisis affecting our nation and Church in the same way my experience of the destruction and rebirth of the forest preserve taught me. Isaiah wrote, “A shoot shall rise up from the stump of Jesse; and from its roots a bud shall blossom.” (Isaiah 11:1)

One of the most important biblical scholars of my lifetime, Walter Brueggeman, reminds us, “The stump is any closed-off historical possibility, any place in life that has failed and collapsed and ended in despair. It is like an old potted plant, dead and thrown into the compost pile, forgotten and abandoned [Isaiah’s] poem imagines that God can, and does, raise up new life where none seemed possible. ... Peace is a dream that is uttered first on the lips of God, a dream that speaks against all settled political reality, an act of imagination from the throne of heaven in which we are invited to participate.”

All of this brings us to a crucial challenge of Christian hope. Ruben Alvez, a Brazilian author, explains, “Hope is ... the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress are not the last word.” Walter Brueggemann exhorts us, “Think of a place where you are stump[ted] and imagine a new “shoot” of life, energy and possibility, where none is expected. The newness lives on the lips of the faithful God. Peacemakers are not the ‘old reliables,’ but are new folks that appear uncredentialed and make a difference.”

MACK: I had never thought of Jesus’ metaphors that way – that’s wonderful! Quotes from Brueggeman — “peace is a dream that is uttered first on the lips of God, a dream that speaks against all settled political reality” — and Alvez — “hope is...the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress are not the last word” — got me thinking about what the Book of Nature can show us about finding and practicing peace in a violent world. As I write this, it has been four days since Israel and the US began a large-scale bombardment of Iran, and the world feels very violent. During times like these, I feel I must work harder to find examples coexisting peacefully — beings interacting with others without committing or experiencing physical, verbal, or mental violence.

The Book of Nature has much to teach us in this regard. For instance, my relationship with my cat and the other cats I’ve known have taught me much about both peaceful and violent coexistence. Most importantly, though, it’s led me to greater appreciation for the power we as humans must choose peace.

In my last year of college, I shared a house with one roommate and two cats, one formerly from the streets and another formerly from the farm. They were, respectively, the smallest and largest cats I had known at the time, and the smaller once-street cat, Bitty, was weakened by a chronic disease. The larger once-farm cat, Russ, would chase and sometimes scratch Bitty. It drove me up the wall. I wasn't raised with animals, and I couldn't understand why Russ felt the need to intimidate Bitty when they both had ample food and space.



My current cat, Princess, came from the same farm as Russ. I hear it's populated with too many cats and that many cats go hungry. I think of the trauma cats experience and then commit to other cats — a cycle of cyclical violence. Humans, being animals, have similar tendencies. But God made us to think, to empathize, and to inspire others to transcend our urges to react out of fear, pain, and hunger. What a privilege and responsibility it is to live as peacefully as we possibly can — and to inspire others to do the same.

While I'm sure I'm not "inspiring" Princess, per se, I hope she cherishes a life without violence. She certainly helps me find peace within myself, especially on days when I'm struggling to remember examples of peaceful coexistence in my life.

TOM: I envy your relationship with animals. I never had pets growing up. (I always told people I did not have a pet because I had five siblings.) I became a vegetarian, in part, because of the way industrialized farming treated animals. The rise of agri-business and the demise of family farms have changed the relationship between farmers/ranchers and their animals and land.

Part of the problem with our relationship with animals, especially "wild" animals, is the way we "other" our fellow creatures. Often, we are socialized to see them as threats, infestations, or nuisances. At the same time, we trivialized and romanticized St. Francis's relationship with animals. (Why do we bless our pets on his feast day, but not the indigenous animals residing in our ecosystem?)

Even our reading of the Book of Nature can become corrupted by our othering of "wildlife." The way we understand how nature works says more about us than it does about our planet. This is especially true in the way many people understand evolution. We interpret concepts like "survival of the fittest" in terms of warfare and violence: "kill or be killed."

Darwin understood that the "fittest" were not the ones who were able to dominate or impose their will over other species. The "fittest" were the ones who could adapt and change with the

ever-changing environment. It is adaptation, flexibility and “creativity” that matter in the game of life, not who is the biggest or most powerful. In the Web of Life, apex predators are among the first to go when environmental catastrophes occur.

I do not believe that violence is the correct way to understand the relationship between predators and prey. Violence is about controlling, dominating, and imposing one’s will over others. Properly understood, predators are nature’s janitors – eliminating the sick and ill-adapted creatures so that the herd (the community) stays healthy and continues to adapt to threats. All creatures, great and small, are part of a web of life that is characterized by a constant process of creation and destruction.



This is why I have always been attracted to the image of the Peaceable Kingdom described by the prophet Isaiah (11:6). I have a woodcut by Fritz Eichenberg depicting the Peaceable Kingdom in my bedroom. I especially like the scale of the creatures included in the image. The human (a child) is not raised above the others, but is part of the community of creatures. It is a great source of inspiration and meditation.

Conclusion

We learned an immense amount from each other throughout the course of this multi-month dialogue, and we hope you’ve been able to glean a sliver of wisdom from it as well. That said, we recognize that the value of such reflections lies not in having the right answers but in asking the right questions. In closing, we’d like to leave you with a quote.

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)