

# Way of the World

*By John Herliby*

If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.

—Wendell Berry

**W**hen we think of the world, our world, this world as opposed to the next world, we might ask ourselves: What does the world have to offer its inhabitants beyond the baubles and bubbles of a transient life? Is it worth the effort to construct a grand theory of the world that embraces such critical questions relating to its mystery, purpose, origin? When we leave it behind, do we leave ourselves behind with it, bare bones buried into the earth's crust as the remnant of a life once lived and now forgotten? No doubt, there is mystery in the air when we see butterflies in flight and fire flies in the night. When we look toward the horizon from the near shore, there is magic in the distance where dolphins roam and the sea-lanes meet the grand esplanades in the sky. We have heart-felt questions that have been explored down through the centuries and are still worth exploring as long as people speculate about the hidden nature of their surroundings and wonder about the true nature of Reality.

The Qur'anic scripture freely lends its insight when it mentions the world as "nothing but play and amusement" (6:32) and worse a form of "pomp and mutual boasting." (57:20) One verse states plainly enough: "It is the life of this world that deceives them." (6:130) Is the world merely a venue of habitation that we take for granted, and life itself merely a rite of passage from birth to death that amounts to nothing more than a parenthetical moment in time between two eternities out of which we were born and into which we shall return? Does the human experience of living and dying on earth only highlight the personal destiny of a short life on a slow-moving sphere, here to experience the dramatic

hills and valleys of our untamed emotions? Are we investing our deepest sympathies in a vagabond world that roams through the darkness of outer space like a marble rolling aimlessly down the corridors of the universe, reflecting the moody hues of blue, green, and bone-grey from the light of the sun, borrowed light no less, that gives color to our lives? How do we lift the weight of the world from our shoulders, transforming the spirit of this world into the remarkable and infectious world of the Spirit that “hovers over the waters” of our lives in premonition and promise to an unseen Reality within the shell of the physical world?

The earth is cloaked in the vestments of universal nature, which is none other than our beloved Earth Mother, represented across the globe through the vision of majestic mountains and serene valleys, vast oceans and tranquil lakes, undulating deserts and broad savannas, snow-clad, pine forests and tropical jungles awash in monsoon rains. Such things as a sea-shell, spider web, or butterfly wing require no genie to work their magic, all these things are complete unto themselves and serve as symbols of a Supreme Intelligence working on our behalf. “Nature is painting for us, day after day, images of infinite beauty,” writes British art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900). Lest we do the unpardonable and leave Shakespeare out of the mix, we are reminded of Nature’s magnanimous quality in touching our hearts with serenity and peace when the Bard writes in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) one of his most moving and perceptive insights: “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.”

We look upon the sublime panorama of nature as we look at pictures at an exhibition, yet in nature’s presence, as in the presence of all great art, we are as nothing, inconsequential, humbled, speechless with nothing to say that can echo the mighty roar of the oceans or the stillness of a forest glen. “Mountains are earth’s un-decaying monuments,” writes Nathaniel Hawthorne in his lesser known work *The Notch of the White Mountains* (1868) in tribute to their enduring quality. “Nature, even when she is scant and thin outwardly, satisfies us still by the assurance of a certain generosity at the roots,” exclaims Henry David Thoreau with characteristic insight, adding “if only to suggest that the earth has higher uses than we put her to.” Nature is always there in full dress seemingly ready to knock on our door, detached, serene, powerful, and yet it never stoops low enough to acknowledge us in her presence. “How strange that Nature does not knock, and yet does not intrude!” writes Emily

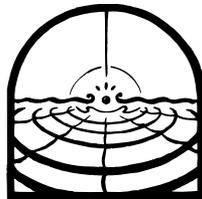
Dickinson in a letter to a friend. It is up to us to recognize nature's powerful message, written into the color of precious stones, the sounds of bubbling streams and the stern face of storm clouds.

In Islam, according to the Qur'an, universal nature is a revelation on a par with the Qur'an itself in terms of the secrets it contains within its heart. "We are surrounded and embraced by her," Goethe writes, "powerless to separate ourselves from her and powerless to penetrate beyond her. We live in her midst and know her not. She is incessantly speaking to us, but betrays not her secret." "In Nature's infinite book of secrecy, a little I can read," Shakespeare echoes in his play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Franz Kafka has clarified the point in this way: "Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen; simply wait. Do not even wait; be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked; it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet." To read the book of Nature is to read the message of the traditional symbols that constitute the elements and forms of that nature. "And in the earth are signs for those whose faith is sure, and within yourselves. Can you then not see? And in the heavens is your sustenance and that which you are promised. By the Lord of Heaven and Earth, this is the Truth." (51: 20-23).

A limitless range of traditional signs and symbols exist within the manifested world of nature. They confront the mind and the imagination of humanity with their revelatory knowledge of other worlds, their premonition of higher realities and their numinous message of the unity and oneness of the Supreme Being. They exist within this world as created forms that remember God through their very existence. Through their presence, they express something of the transparent reality that exists within and beyond every external form. According to the traditionalist perspective, the entire created universe is a form of revelation and a sign of the Divinity.

Dressed in the refinements of nature, can we call the planet home? The short answer must be yes, for a while at least, during a continuum of time that acts as a parenthesis between two eternities. This may sound strange since there can be only one eternity during which earthly time seems but a parenthetical expression. However, from the human point of view, it does indeed seem like we exist "in time"—in circumambulation of the earth around the sun—but a measured time that exists between

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