

SPIRITUALITY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Spiritual Habits for the Cultivation of Ecological Virtue
Convener: Wendy M. Wright, Creighton University
Moderator: Colleen Carpenter, Saint Catherine University
Presenters: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
Michele Saracino, Manhattan College

Our opening speaker, J. Matthew Ashley, in his paper entitled “Aldo Leopold and Ecological Conversion: Contemplative Practices and Teaching *A Sand County Almanac*,” first considered the substantial current of literature that discusses the fruitfulness of using a variety of contemplative practices in the classroom. These practices can help students develop habits of sustained attention (mindfulness) and the capacity to dwell in and engage paradox and ambiguity. These, he affirmed, are habits and capacities particularly important for teaching courses dealing with nature, since students often are unable to experience themselves as embedded in nature (rather than being observers/manipulators of “nature”). Aldo Leopold understood this seventy years ago in composing *A Sand County Almanac*. There is good evidence from his life, from the structure of his classic text, and even from certain passages in it that echo contemplative traditions within and outside of Christianity, that Aldo intended this text to be material for contemplation. Ashley spoke of his own attempts to teach this dimension of the book by having students do a sort of *lectio divina* of passages in the “Almanac” and “Sketches Here and There” sections of the book, in tandem with selected biblical passages. He followed this exercise by asking students to do a *lectio divina* of the natural world they find around them. He described the environment of the Notre Dame campus and the contrast between the “manicured” landscape of the main campus and the rougher and less attended to paths and areas around the lakes. Through these experiences, and reflection on them, students seemed better prepared to understand and appreciate the more philosophical elements of the book (including the statement of the land ethic) at the end of the text.

Michele Saracino followed this paper with her own creative ruminations on “Into the Blue: Swimming as Spiritual Practice.” She began with the observation that we all tend to dwell “in the middle” where desire, hope, grief, and loss are constantly in flux. Employing a Christian idiom, she likened this to a “Saturday” experience (living in the liminal space between Good Friday and Easter Sunday) where improvisation is key to navigating reality. She then turned to reflections prompted by Wallace Nichols’ *Blue Mind*, and considered how water can help people become their better selves. Swimming can be an unsettling experience: one needs to get a feeling for the water, i.e. for the “other,” the unfamiliar environment in which there must be constant adjustment. Strokes must be neither aggressive nor submissive, one must learn the changing patterns of work, recovery and strategic adjustment, one must deal with the phenomenon of “drag,” one must learn to develop “proprioception” or the ability to sense stimuli arising within the body regarding position, motion, and equilibrium, and especially to know where one is in relation to other bodies. Especially in swimming one must become resigned to living in the “middle,” to be open to constant change where one must vacate the self-sufficient “I,” let go or mourn the illusion of mastery, become vulnerable and thus open to grace. Aware of the possible disadvantages of promoting submission, Saracino nevertheless cited any number of theologians and

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spiritual writers who consider the cultivation of vulnerability and surrender as essential to openness to grace (Jean Vanier, Hans Urs von Balthazar, Emmanuel Levinas, Akiko Busch etc). She followed with a consideration of the gravity of water in most religious traditions and the symbolism of water as healing, merciful, cleansing, and pure, as well as destructive yet generating new birth.

Learning to navigate the “Saturday experience,” or the middle way that is our life then, can be facilitated by swimming; plunging into the element of water to learn habits of intentionality (the capacity to compose a life and be aware of change), improvisation (attend to feedback, make changes in relation to the “other”), mourning (submission to the reality that we do not have complete mastery), and empathy (just being there with the other) that can open one to the grace of Saturday and be applicable to life’s varied challenges such as interfaith encounter.

The conversation following the two presentations ranged widely and gave rise, as one commentator said, to a “mosaic of thoughts.” About teaching students contemplative practices focused on nature, questions were raised about differing university environments and access to “natural” spaces. Ashley related some of his better and worse experiments with teaching such practices and varying student responses. Conversation then explored the ideas about water and swimming as spiritual practice. Considerations of “deep play” referenced by Diane Ackerman, the idea of “pause,” questions about how the spiritual dimensions of breath and breathing might be part of a spiritual understanding of swimming, and a comment that it has been observed that early experiences of trauma are frequently uncovered while swimming, came to the fore.

Next year’s theme of Grace at Work in the World was considered by those present. Some of the suggestions included the idea of the cruciform dimension of grace as linked to issues of racism and sexism; play and joy and playfulness of grace; a spirituality of happiness (a la Joanna Macy); and Roger Haight’s recent linking of the disciplines of spirituality and theology in his *Spirituality Seeking Theology*.

WENDY M. WRIGHT
Creighton University
Omaha, Nebraska