

A Nobler Want

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A nobler want of man is served by Nature, namely, the love of beauty. Ralph Waldo Emerson



Deep in our Nature there is more than thoughts of wheels and machines. Deeper than all, at the center, is love, and intertwined with love is beauty, in intimate embrace. We have those moments; a quiet splendor of a sunset, the unfathomable depths and clarity of a new born's eyes, the warmth and trust of grasping a child's hand, the musical note that just had to be so. In these moments we touch the heart of what it is to be a child of Nature.

We live in a world of both Nature and technology; and both flavor my day-to-day experience. I awake in response to an alarm clock, go to the refrigerator and coffee maker, empty the dishwasher, sit in front of the computer for a while before going to my car to drive to work, check my phone messages, and so on. My behavior is greatly influenced by the inflexible rules of my machines, I have learned how I must behave when interacting with them to accomplish my various goals.

Nature comes into my awareness as well; the songs of birds as I open the door to fetch the morning newspaper, the clouds drifting above as I walk to my office, and sometimes I note the presence and shape of the moon. I live near mountains, so close as to be neighbors. I always look at them out when I go outside. Today they are covered with snow, their majestic peaks disappearing into the clouds.

There is a fundamental difference between the world of Nature and the world of technology. Things of technology are constructed, they are made of parts, and they are made with a purpose. A

clock, for example, obviously has parts. The parts were constructed first, and were then assembled to make the clock. The clock was made to fulfill a specific function, in other words, it was constructed for a *purpose*, to indicate the time. When the clock cannot fulfill that purpose it is useless and will be thrown away...unless it also happens to be a work of art.

Things of Nature are not constructed. A flower, for example, is not made, it grows, it grows from a seed that grew from a plant that grew from a seed. A flower does not have parts. What we may think of as its parts--leaves, roots, petals--are but areas of a seamless whole that in the process of growing branched out in various ways; these areas were not created first and then pieced together; and, not having been constructed, the flower has no purpose. How sad, how empty if the lovely flower has no purpose, and as children of Nature if we have no purpose either, but perhaps how incredibly beautiful.

There is a common saying in my culture that 'everything has a purpose'. I suppose this is the natural conclusion to draw from the belief that there is a Being who constructed the universe. We know what it is like to construct things, particularly technology, things that have a purpose, and we project those experiences onto an infinite Being. But that is a projection of only part of who we are, for we are also artists. It is possible to approach the universe as a work of art, where something other than reason holds sway, and purpose takes a back seat to aesthetics.

It could be that the universe is not a 'work' at all, that there is no outside Being who created it, that it just sprung into being or has always simply 'been'. In any case there is obviously pattern to the world, all is not random, there is order and complexity. We ourselves are complex patterns operating within a larger universe of even more complex patterns. We seem to do ok, we have some important skills at handling these complexities. We can--for example--embrace the incredible complexity of a symphony. It may take some exposure to classical music, some time to apprehend the patterns available in that type of music before we can appreciate the beauty of the more complex expressions of those patterns, but we pull it off, for we are of pattern ourselves.

Technology, in a way, is part of Nature, for it is a creation of humans and we are a creation of Nature. Specifically, technology is the product of the mode of thinking that is analytical and goal-directed. This logical/technological/intellectual mode of thought focuses on pieces, its forte is understanding pieces, but it is curiously inept at comprehending the relationships between the pieces, at comprehending the complexity of the patterns of interactions that is Life, at grasping the pattern as a whole. The intellect, while a product of Nature, is incapable of understanding the processes of Nature from which it emerged. It *can* understand technology, for that *is* a product of the intellect.

So where can we turn to comprehend the larger patterns of Nature and creation? Is there some aspect of our being that is more closely aligned in its processes to that of Nature itself? Well, yes, I wouldn't pose the question unless I had an answer to propose. For that I will paraphrase the writings of the cyberneticist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson.



Flower in the hand of a poet.

To the intellect a rose is just a rose is just a rose. But to the poet a flower is more. Creations provide a glimpse of the creator. The beauty and patterns of a flower give the poet a glimpse of the processes of Nature that created the flower, and there the poet is moved by the recognition that these are the same processes he or she used to create a poem. This moment of identity of the poet with the creator of the rose is tempered by the humble realization that the poet too is a product of those same processes. As the poem is to the poet so the flower and the poet are to Nature.

This then I propose. The intellect can comprehend its own creations (e.g. technology) and can understand and manipulate small pieces of the larger pattern of Nature. It is incapable of understanding, however, the processes that led to its own creation, for the intellect is not the product of an intellect, it is the product of the nonintellectual processes of Nature. To understand the creative patterns of Nature we must turn to that aspect of ourselves that operates with the same processes, that can best comprehend the relationship between pieces, that can

comprehend the pattern made by the pieces, what is called our 'sense of aesthetics'. There we find love, beauty, and the meaning of our existence.

As a culture we tend to favor the intellect, to manipulating pieces of the pattern without comprehending the effects on the overall pattern itself. There is great danger there. Perhaps if we put those manipulations within the larger framework of aesthetics we could start heading toward a future that has beauty. It may be time, as a culture and as individuals, to attend more to beauty, and it is in the nature of the world that beauty and Nature and love are intertwined. This the poet knows.

Acknowledgements

I was greatly influenced in my writing of this essay by the thoughts of Alan Watts (*Nature, Man, and Woman*) and Gregory Bateson (*A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*), and by the influence of the Andean paq'o Américo Yábar who reminded me of how beneficial it is to attend to the beauty of Nature.

Further Reading

I strongly recommend that you read the beautiful expression of these ideas in *The Bird and the Machine*, a chapter in Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey : An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature*.

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