

# Loving as Well as Learning

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I remember, as a child, the very first time I saw the stars on a high mountain ridge in Colorado. It was a clear summer night; no artificial lights distracted from the vista. So many stars, all so bright! I almost had to squint just to look at them.

That vision filled me with wonder, awe, and mystery—what William Wordsworth called “a presence that disturbs me with joy.”

That summer night I realized for the first time that being in nature, in wilderness, I could feel *both very small and very large*. At once. For when we are under the stars, or by the ocean shore, or in an ancient forest, we are both diminished and enlarged: *humbled* by the sheer scale of it all, while also *expanded* by our *connection* to such vastness—as a piece of the universe, a part of creation.

That experience left me with a deep wellspring of wonder—and a lifelong desire to learn more about the cosmos.

Another youthful memory was the day my mother, at age sixty, decided she would go back to school to become a *geologist*. This was a very long way, both intellectually and temporally, from her studies of French literature in college.

How did she explain her decision? She pointed at Pike’s Peak, which was easily visible from our ranch, and said: “You see that mountain? It’s really a kind of *book*. Yes, a book with many fascinating stories to tell. *And I am going to learn how to read it.*”

Now, you’ll notice something about those two experiences: They invoke loving as well as learning. We are still, at our core, emotional beings. Our extraordinary capacities for rational thought and inquiry can be empowered—or derailed—by our emotional selves. Just as we rely on *stories* to understand our lives and our world, we yearn for knowledge to understand the greater story of which we are a part.

Do we hope to *change* human behavior? To affect economic markets, technologies, and public policies? More than that, do we hope to *survive* as a species?

If so, we will need all the *comprehension* we gain from the sciences—and all the *context* we gain from the humanities. We cannot prevail, alas, with only the facts. We need to inspire *loving as well as learning*. And to do that, we must rely on the humanities: our stories, music, art, religion, myths, psychology, history, and cultures. The voices of all peoples, from all times.

Consider the power of such sources to enlighten and inspire. Most people, I suspect, wouldn't think of the Bible as an environmental treatise. Yet ... what else is God's command in *Genesis* that we are given the Garden of Eden "to till and keep it"? Isn't that telling us that the future of our *tilling* depends on the wisdom of our *keeping*?

Or think about Noah's Ark. To be sure, this is a story about faith. But it's *also* a parable about *stewardship*: the Endangered Species Act of 5,000 B.C. Seriously, if God made Noah go through *so much trouble* to save all the creatures of the Earth—then *how can we do any less*?

Just as modern science—the realm of discovery—can help to inform the humanities, literature and the arts—the realm of metaphor—can help to express modern science.

My whole worldview was changed when I first encountered the writings of Loren Eiseley, a paleontologist by training and a poet by nature. In one essay, he mused about geologic time while walking on the rutted hills of eastern Montana, searching for fossils of sabertooth tigers. He described the folds of the land as the surface of a huge, exposed brain—and the fossils he was seeking as the remnants of forgotten thoughts.

How could anyone hear that metaphor and not gain a fresh appreciation for evolutionary biology and geology?

The context we gain from the humanities is not limited just to our own lives, our own present story. It helps us to connect ourselves to a future, untold story. Will we heed our better angels and protect our planet for all the children, species, and ecosystems to come? Or will we drive ourselves and other creatures to extinction?

There is a lovely Greek proverb: "No man stands so tall as when he kneels to plant a tree, under whose shade he will never sit."

And now, let me conclude by citing one more venerable source. You've heard me quote some "light-hearted" texts such as the Bible ... so now I'd like to quote from that poet of profound seriousness: Ogden Nash.

Quite fitting for this hall that holds so much geologic history, he wrote a poem called *The Fossils*:

*At midnight in the museum hall  
The fossils gathered for a ball.  
There were no drums or saxophones  
But just the clatter of their bones;  
A rolling, rattling, carefree circus  
Of mammoth polkas and mazurkas.  
Pterodactyls and brontosauruses  
Sang ghostly prehistoric choruses.  
Amid the mastodonic wassail  
I caught the eye of one small fossil.  
Cheer up, old man, he said, and winked—  
It's kind of fun to be extinct.*

Fun? Well ... I'm not so sure.

Let us *not* go extinct. Let us *save* this wondrous planet for all times. And let us raise our voices in story and song—inspired by all that we learn as well as all that we love.