

On Becoming

A Collection of Meditations Curated by Art House Dallas



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Foreword

“For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it.”

—Wendell Berry

Our places shape our loves and longings as well as our knowing and doing. Put simply, who we become is intimately related to how we imagine where we are. As the craftsmanship of God’s artistry, human beings are made for imaginative responsibility in community and creation. Though much is broken in the world and ourselves, the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives the transformed vision necessary to see the tangible facets of life woven into the fabric of becoming.

This collection of art is an invitation to the idea and reality of becoming, not individual self-actualization but a rich growth into the fullness of Christ. In Him, the particularities of life in creation become the raw materials for cultivation in community—this song, this painting, this meal, this prayer, this poem. The flesh and blood Word, who “moved into the neighborhood”, has called us to live with creative responsibility and become who we were always meant to be, God’s beloved children.

The anthology you hold before you is the loving creation of a community of friends in hope of transformation. Each chapter includes a text, poem, visual art, and scripture, along with questions for prayerful reflection to draw you further up and further in the journey of becoming. We hope you will find the authors, poets, and visual artists to be wise guides and friends as you enter into a companioned journey of becoming in Christ through the door of imagination and deeper to the heart. May this collection attune our senses to the sacred character of how we live and create in the particular place we find ourselves now. In all our searching for truth, justice, and beauty: to become fully, we must first be found in creation by the pursuing love of God, who asks, “Where are you?”

—Art House Dallas

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Making Peace with Creation

“I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out of lifeless things? And if God’s body is God by union, it is immutable. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh created in time is quickened by a logical and reasoning soul. I honour all matter besides, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me.”

—*St. John of Damascus*

Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images

Reconciliation With The Land

by Norman Wirzba

In the fall of 1986, I left the foothills and plains of southern Alberta to begin a master's degree at Yale Divinity School. On my way, I traveled through Gary, Indiana. Nothing prepared me for what I experienced there: thick gray air, an unbelievably foul smell, a greenish-orange cloud in place of the horizon and smokestacks belching putrid poison into the sky.

I couldn't believe people lived there. I saw a few men fishing in lagoons of brackish, foamy water. What sort of fish could possibly be living in this sludge? I wondered if they ate what they caught. What kind of health issues did these men and their families face, surrounded as they were by toxic water, land and air? Knowing it was a futile gesture, I opened my window and yelled to the world outside.

It took me a long time to absorb what I saw. I'm still absorbing it. The air that I knew as a farm boy in southern Alberta was crisp and clear and even fragrant, often carrying the scent of sweet grass. The Rocky Mountain snowpacks an hour to my west provided clean, fresh water. And the deep brown soil smelled of fertility. The contrast with Gary was jarring.

I know it is dangerous to put too much stock in childhood memories. Was I being naive in remembering only the good and pleasant parts? As children, we don't have the complicated understanding we gradually acquire as adults, and I now recognize that plenty of problems were associated with the industrial agriculture and resource development taking hold in Alberta. Still, as I drove through Gary, I knew with the certainty of my nose and eyes that something was deeply wrong with the way this section of the Great Lakes region, with its plant and animal and human inhabitants, was being treated.

When I arrived at Yale, I discovered that almost no one was talking in theological terms about our capacity to destroy the land. The stench and death that Gary exhibited hardly appeared as a theological concern or problem. Although almost everyone I met professed belief in God as the Creator—indeed, this may be one teaching that most people professing belief in God can agree on!—it seemed that creation itself was of little concern. Surely it is a contradiction to profess belief in the Creator while showing disregard or disdain for the works of the Creator's hands.

The Wide Scope of God's Reconciling Concerns

Today's church suffers from a reconciliation deficit disorder. The cause of this disorder is an impoverished imagination. As Christians, we have a hard time imagining that God desires all creatures—human and nonhuman, living and nonliving—to be reconciled with each other and with God. For a variety of reasons, we have come to think that God cares primarily, perhaps only, about us.

The history of the church shows that Christians have frequently curtailed the scope of what and whom God cares about. Are we to include everyone—all men and women and children, all races and ethnic groups, all social and economic classes—within the group that God chooses to love and save? Should we think of God's salvific purposes as including bodies, communities and the land? Maybe God cares only about individual souls (white, male, American, heterosexual, economically successful) making their way to heaven.

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, said that as a child of the Jim Crow South he sang, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." He sang this, Jordan recalled as an adult, while watching the poor, hungry black children of his town be mistreated by the members of his congregation. Could it be that God had favorite children, or was it that we were picking favorites? Jordan was seeing the propensity of humans to limit the scope of God's love. Depending on your class, race and even gender, you were either in the group God really cared about or out of it. As Jordan later turned the wasted and abused red clay of southwest Georgia into a productive farm and forest, he must have wondered if we as a species had also come to limit God's love only to humanity, thus forgetting God's love for the whole creation.

As members of the early church thought about the significance of Christ's life and ministry, they came to an astounding affirmation of the cosmic, all-inclusive scope of God's love. The long arc of God's redemptive purposes is not confined to individual, disembodied souls, let alone souls of a particular gender or race or ethnicity or class. Referring to Jesus, they sang in one of their earliest hymns that "all things in heaven and on earth," "things visible and invisible," were created in him, through him and for him (Col 1:16). Jesus is the one in whom "all things hold together" (Col 1:17). And it is through this particular man that "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20). Clearly, this hymn declares that "all things" have a place in God's reconciling and redeeming life. All places—from the foothills of southern Alberta to industrial centers like Gary, Indiana—are destined to

know the health and salvation of God.

This way of thinking should startle us. Here we are presented with a vision in which nothing escapes God's love and attention. Why? Because God created everything. As created by God, the creation is all good and beautiful and of the highest value. But what could it possibly mean to say that a person who lived within the created order—Jesus—is also the one through whom and for whom all creatures came to be? Why should we think that the great diversity of creation holds together in him? And what are the implications of believing that Christ's cross makes possible the peace and reconciliation of all creatures?

Clearly, Jesus is no ordinary person. What Christ accomplishes exceeds the expectations and imaginations of most people. Indeed, part of the good news of the gospel is the fact that we cannot limit God's love. Good news has been proclaimed "to every creature under heaven," which means that the gospel is also intended for every creature and will have its appropriate, divinely desired effect (Col 1:23). What would it look like, practically speaking, to proclaim the gospel to rivers, redwoods, raccoons and roaches? Is our presence on earth good news for all the creatures with which we live?

One of the more striking aspects of this early Christian hymn is its affirmation of material, fleshly life. Here Christ is not reduced to a moral or spiritual teacher who comes down to earth to deliver a few special teachings that will get some of us to heaven. God's life with us, his dwelling with us, does not happen as an immaterial soul-to-soul or mind-to-mind connection. It is body to body, flesh to flesh. What God accomplishes in Christ he accomplishes through blood, the medium of bodily life. God reconciles all the bodies of this world in and by Jesus' "fleshly body through death" (Col 1:22).

What these passages mean, and what practical transformations they entail, we have yet to see. For now, we can determine that this way of speaking sets a baseline for our thinking about the nature of God's reconciliation through Christ: *Christian reconciliation is about bringing all bodies into a peaceful, life-promoting and convivial relationship with each other.* It makes no sense to limit reconciliation to people, let alone individual souls, since we thrive only insofar as we are nurtured, warmed, inspired and protected by the countless bodies of creation that daily touch or circulate through us. The reconciliation of only human souls with each other, however commendable and beautiful, would be an impoverished reconciliation if such souls were consigned to bodies that must eat, drink and breathe their way through a poisoned and degraded creation. Such an incomplete reconciliation would amount to a repudiation of the created earth God loves and daily sustains. It

would be a denial of the resurrection power that will bring our bodies into the new heaven and new earth to live with God forever (see Rev 21).

We can spend a lot of time debating whether or not Paul and the early Christians really believed worms, plants and bees to be included in God's salvation of the world. In certain respects, the debate is beside the point. Unless we believe that God cares only about disembodied souls—a position consistently condemned by the church as heretical—then it is all of creation or none of it that God will save. Human life simply makes no sense apart from the life of all creation. We live only because the worms, plants and bees do too. And they live because God loves them.



Refraction by Phil Irish
Oil on aluminum
48" x 79" x 7"
2017

The Peace of Wild Things

by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Matthew 6:25–34

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

An Invitation to Respond: Ecological Examen

- All creation reflects the beauty and blessing of God's image. Where was I most aware of this today? Can I identify and pin-point how I made a conscious effort to care for God's creation during this day?
- What challenges or joys do I experience as I recall my care for creation?
- How can I repair breaks in my relationship with creation, in my unspoken sense of superiority?
- As I imagine tomorrow, I ask for the grace to see the Incarnate Christ in the dynamic interconnections of all Creation.
- Conclude with the prayer of Jesus: The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.



Art House Dallas is a 501(c)(3) non-profit which works to cultivate creativity for the common good in order to inspire everyone to live more imaginative, meaningful lives. We accomplish our mission by fostering community amongst individuals, believing that their rich artistic expression will serve to bring a greater sense of belonging to our city. Our programming reaches individuals across many genres of the arts including music, writing, visual art, spiritual formation, and more.

Learn more at www.arthousedallas.com

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