

Living as Creatures: Wonder and Humility as Ecological Virtues

Steve Bouma-Prediger
Hope College

What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper?

Rachel Carson

Humility trains us in the art of being creatures. It does so by teaching us to be honest about our need, grateful for the gifts of others, and faithful in the service of healing the many memberships of creation.

Norman Wirzba

I. The Night Sky

II. Wonderings about Wonder

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. ...Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. (Rachel Carson)

III. Musings on Humility

Humility is the virtue that tempers and restrains the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately. (Thomas Aquinas)

IV. Biblical Insight into Wonder and Humility

There are probably not many ethics courses in colleges or seminaries that spend the first three days in silence—one day in the forest, one day at the shore of the sea, and one night in a field gazing at the stars. Yet something like that is what God requires of Job as the starting point for a new moral understanding. (Carol Newsome)

The virtue of wonder is the settled disposition to stand in rapt attention and amazement in the presence of something awe-inspiring, mysterious, or new.

The vice of deficiency is insensibility or the lack of proper sensory perception or emotional response, sometimes bordering on indifference, while the vice of excess is hyper-astonishment or the disposition toward indiscriminate amazement.

We are *'adâm*--earth creature--because we are clumps of earth-- *'adâmâh*--animated by the Spirit of God (Gen. 2:7). And lest we forget, the text reminds us that "to dust we shall return" (3:19). We, like all of God's creatures, are finite.

The virtue of humility is the settled disposition to properly estimate one's abilities or capacities.

The vice of deficiency is hubris or overweening pride, while the vice of excess is self-deprecation or the tendency to play down one's ability or speak disparagingly about legitimate achievements.

V. Ecological Wonder and Humility

The ecological virtue of wonder is the settled disposition to stand in rapt attention and enthralled amazement in the presence of the awe-inspiring natural world. This ecological virtue names the capability of grateful amazement at the world of wonders God has made, sustains, and is remaking.

The vice of deficiency is ecological insensibility or the inability to be amazed by the wonders of the world. The vice of excess is ecological hyper-astonishment or the proclivity to always be in awe about everything.

The ecological virtue of humility is the settled disposition to act in such way that we know our place and fit harmoniously into it, whether our local community, our bioregion, or our home planet. This ecological virtue names the inclination to act as the earth creatures we are—finite and fallen, embodied and embedded.

The vice of deficiency is ecological arrogance or the tendency to put humans, cocky and confident, at the center of the universe. The vice of excess is ecological self-deprecation or the disposition to diminish the role of humans as earthkeepers or undervalue the place of humans as caretakers of creation.

VI. Wonder and Humility Embodied

VII. Thinking Like a Mountain

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (Aldo Leopold)