

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 9:

Day unto day uttereth speech, And night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. PSALM 19:2-5.

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. ROMANS 8:19-22.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. . And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. REVELATION 21:1; 22:1-2.

Each year when Good Friday and Easter Sunday approach us our thoughts turn toward the great drama of redemption, culminating in the pictures of the Cross and Resurrection. Who is redeemed? Some men alone; or mankind, including all nations; or the world, everything that is created, including nature, the stars and the clouds, the winds and the oceans, the stones and the plants, the animals and our own bodies? The Bible speaks again and again of the salvation of the *world*, as it speaks of the creation of the *world* and the subjection of the *world* to anti-Divine forces. And *world* means nature as well as man.

So let us ask today: what does nature mean to us? What does it mean to itself? What does it mean in the great drama of creation and salvation? A threefold answer is contained in the words of the psalmist, the apostle and the prophet: the psalmist sings of the glory of nature; the apostle shows the tragedy of nature; and the prophet pronounces the salvation of nature. The hymn of the psalmist praises the glory of God in the glory of nature; the letter of the apostle links the tragedy of nature to the tragedy of man; and the vision of the prophet

sees the salvation of nature in the salvation of the world.

So let us listen once more to the words of the psalmist, about the glory of nature, in their precise meaning.

The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament showeth the work of his hands. Day unto day poureth forth the story, night unto night announces the knowledge. There is no speech, no language! Their voice cannot be heard! *But* their music goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

The 19th Psalm points to an old belief held by the ancient world and expressed by poets and philosophers: that the heavenly bodies, the sun and the moon and the stars, produce by their movement a harmony of tones, sounding day and night from one end of the world to the other. These voices of the universe are not heard by human ears; they do not speak in human language. But they exist, and we can perceive them through the organs of our spirit. Shakespeare says: "There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest, but in his motion like an angel sings. Such harmony is in immortal souls; but whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it." The psalmist *has* heard it; he knows what the stars are sounding: the glory of creation and its Divine Ground.

Are we able to perceive the hidden voice of nature? Does nature speak to us? Does it speak to you? Or has nature become silent to us, silent to the men of our period? Some of you may say, "Never before in any period has nature been so open to man as it is today." The mysteries of the past have become the knowledge of children. Through every scientific book, through every laboratory, through every machine, nature speaks to us. The technical use of nature is the revelation of its mystery." The voice of nature *has* been heard by the scientific mind, and its answer is the conquest of nature. But is this all that nature says to us?

I was sitting under a tree with a great biologist. Suddenly he exclaimed, "I would like to know something about this tree!" He, of course, knew everything that science had to say about it. I asked him what he meant. And he answered, "I want to know what this tree means for itself. I want to understand the life of this tree. It is so strange, so unapproachable." He longed for a sympathetic understanding of the *life* of nature. But such an understanding is possible only by communion between man and nature. Is such communion possible in our period of history? Is nature not completely subjected to the will and wilfulness of man? This technical civilization, the pride of mankind, has brought about a tremendous devastation of original nature, of the land, of animals, of plants. It has kept genuine nature in small reservations and has occupied everything for domination and ruthless exploitation. And worse: many of us have lost the ability to live with nature. We fill it with the noise of empty talk, instead of listening to its many voices, and, through them, to the voiceless music of the universe. Separated from the soil by a machine, we speed through nature, catching glimpses of it, but never comprehending its greatness or feeling its power. Who is still able to penetrate, meditating and contemplating, the creative ground of nature? A Chinese emperor asked a famous painter to paint a picture of a rooster for him. The painter assented, but said that it would take a long time. After a year the emperor reminded him of his promise. The painter replied that after a year of studying the rooster he had just begun to perceive the surface of its nature. After another year the artist asserted that he had just begun to penetrate the essence of this kind of life. And so on, year after year. Finally, after ten years of concentration on the nature of the rooster, he painted the picture -- a work described as an inexhaustible revelation of the divine ground of the universe in one small part of it, a rooster. Compare the emperor's wise patience and the painter's saintly contemplation of an infinitely small expression of the divine life, with the exuberances of our contemporaries, who rush in their cars to some famous view and exclaim, "How lovely!" referring, no doubt, not to the view, but to their own appreciation of beauty. What blasphemy of the glory of nature! and consequently of the divine ground, the glory of which sounds through the glory of nature.

Praising the glory of nature does not mean speaking of the beauty of nature alone and forgetting its overwhelming greatness and terrible power. Nature never manifests shallow beauty or merely obvious harmony. "The voice of the Lord is powerful", sings the poet of the 29th Psalm. "The voice of the Lord

breaketh the cedars,. the voice of the Lord cleaveth with flames of fire, the voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness and strippeth the forests bare." In the book of Job, we find a description of the terrible power of nature in the mythological symbols of Behemoth and Leviathan. And a great recent poet, Rilke, says: "For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. The glory of nature is not shallow beauty."

And now let us listen once more to the words of the apostle about the tragedy of nature in their precise meaning. "Even the creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed. For creation was not rendered futile by its own choice, but by the will of Him Who thus made it subject, the hope being that creation as well as man would one day be freed from its thralldom to decay and gain the glorious freedom of God's children. To this day, we know, the entire creation sighs and throbs with pain."

Nature is not only glorious; it is also tragic. It is subjected to the laws of finitude and destruction. It is suffering and sighing with us. No one who has ever listened to the sounds of nature with sympathy can forget their tragic melodies. The Greek word in Paul's letter which we have translated as "creation" is especially used for the non-animated section of nature as Paul is alluding to the words of God to Adam after the Fall: "Cursed is the land for thy sake." The sighing sounds of the wind and the ever-restless, futile breaking of the waves may have inspired the poetic, melancholic verse about nature's subjection to vanity. But the words of Paul refer also, and in a more direct way, to the sphere of living things. The melancholy of the leaves falling in autumn, the end of the jubilant life of spring and summer, the quiet death of innumerable beings in the cold air of the approaching winter -- all this has grasped and always will grasp the hearts, not only of poets, but of every feeling man and woman. The song of transitoriness sounds through all the nations. Isaiah's words, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the breath of the Lord bloweth upon it", describe the shortness of the lives of individuals and nations. But they could not have been written without a profound sympathy with the life of nature. And then Jesus speaks, praising the lilies of the field: "Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." In these two sayings about the flowers of the field we perceive both the glory and the tragedy of nature.

Sympathy with nature in its tragedy is not a sentimental emotion; it is a true feeling of the reality of nature. Schelling justly says: "A veil of sadness is spread over all nature, a deep, unappeasable melancholy over all life." According to him this is "manifest through the traces of suffering in the face of all nature, especially in the faces of the animals." The doctrine of suffering as the character of all life, taught by the Buddha, has conquered large sections of mankind. But only he who is connected in the ground of his own being with the ground of nature is able to see into its tragedy; as Schelling says, "The darkest and deepest ground in human nature is 'Longing'. . . is melancholy." This, mainly, creates the sympathy of man with nature. For in nature too the deepest ground is melancholy. Nature, also, mourns for a lost good. Can we still understand the meaning of such half-poetic, half-philosophic words? Or have we too much secluded ourselves in human superiority, in intellectual arrogance, in a domineering attitude toward nature? We have become incapable of perceiving the harmonious sounds of nature. Have we also become insensitive to the tragic sounds?

Why is nature tragic? Who is responsible for the suffering of animals, for the ugliness of death and decay, for the universal dread of death? Many years ago I stood on a jetty with a well-known psychologist looking at the ocean. We saw innumerable small fish hurrying toward the beach. They were pursued by bigger ones, who, in turn, were chased by still bigger ones. Aggression, flight, and anxiety a perfect illustration of the old, often used story of the big fish devouring the small ones, in nature as in history. The scholar, who, in many discussions, had defended the harmonious structure of reality, burst into tears, saying, "Why are these beings created if they exist only to be swallowed by others?" In this moment the tragedy of nature forced itself upon his optimistic mind, and he asked, "Why?"

Paul tries to penetrate the mystery of this question. And his surprising answer is: nature is subjected to vanity by the curse that God uttered because of the fall of Adam. The tragedy of nature is bound to the tragedy of

man, as the salvation of nature is dependent on the salvation of man. What does this mean? Always mankind has dreamed of a time when harmony and joy filled all nature, and peace reigned between nature and man. Paradise, the Golden Age. But man, by violating the divine law, destroyed the harmony, and now there is enmity between man and nature, between nature and nature. In Paul's melancholic words this dream resounds. It is a dream, but it contains a profound truth: man and nature belong together in their created glory, in their tragedy, and in their salvation. As nature, represented by the "Serpent", leads man into temptation, so man, by his trespassing of the divine law, leads nature into tragedy. This did not happen once upon a time, as the story says; it happens within every time and space, as long as there is time and space. So long as there are the old heaven and the old earth, man and nature will be subjected together to the law of vanity. Many profound thinkers within and without Christianity agree that man is determined to fulfill the longing of nature. In so far as he has failed and still fails to come to his own fulfillment, he is unable to fulfill nature, his own bodily being and nature around him. Therefore, Jesus is called the Son of Man, the man from above, the true man, in whom the forces of separation and tragedy are overcome, not only in mankind but also in the universe. For there is no salvation of man if there is no salvation of nature, for man is in nature and nature is in man.

Let us listen once more to the words of the prophet about the salvation of nature. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. . . And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." **Rev. 21:1, 22:2.**

In powerful images the last book of the Bible describes the salvation of man and nature from the bondage of corruption: the city of God is built with the most precious materials of non-animated nature. The ocean, the symbol of formless chaos, is excluded. The river is not polluted by any rot. The trees bear fruit without change and decay; the animals, together with the saints, adore the throne of glory. The demonic forces are thrown into nothingness. There is no suffering nor death. Needless to say, this is not the description of a future state of our world. Like the Golden Age of the past, the Golden Age of the future is a symbol, pointing to something mysterious within our present world namely, the forces of salvation. And one thing is made very clear in the visions of the prophet, that salvation means salvation of the *world*, and not of human beings alone. Lions and sheep, little children and snakes, will lie together in peace, says Isaiah. Angels and stars, men and animals, adore the Child of the Christmas legend. The earth shakes when the Christ dies, and it shakes again when He is resurrected. The sun loses its light when He closes His eyes, and it rises when He rises from the tomb. The resurrection of the *body* not an immortal soul is the symbol of the victory over death. The bodiless spirit (and this is the meaning of all these images) is not the aim of creation; the purpose of salvation is not the abstract intellect or a natureless moral personality. Do we not see everywhere the estrangement of people from nature, from their own natural forces and from nature around them? And do they not become dry and uncreative in their mental life, hard and arrogant in their moral attitude, suppressed and poisoned in their vitality? They certainly are not the images of salvation. As one theologian has justly said, "Corporal being is the end of the ways of God."

This has always been known to creative painters and sculptors. A great picture or statue is an anticipation of the new earth, a revelation of the mystery of nature. A picture or a statue is a plant or a stone transformed into a bearer of spiritual meaning. It is nature elevated above itself, revealing its tragedy and, at the same time, its victory over its tragedy. The picture of Jesus and the apostles and saints throughout the centuries of Christian art, in color and stone portraits of the men in whom humanity discovered its power and dignity, the incomparable expression of personality in the face of even the simplest individual, show that spirit becomes body, and that nature is not strange to personality. The system of cells and functions, which we call "body", is able to express the finest change of our spiritual being. Artists have often understood the eternal significance of nature, even when theologians have emphasized a bodiless spirituality, forgetting that the first

thing by which Jesus revealed His Messianic vocation was His power to heal bodily and mental sickness.

Let me ask you a question: are we still able to understand what a sacrament means? The more we are estranged from nature, the less we can answer affirmatively. That is why, in our time, the sacraments have lost so much of their significance for individuals and Churches. For in the sacraments nature participates in the process of salvation. Bread and wine, water and light, and all the great elements of nature become the bearers of spiritual meaning and saving power. Natural and spiritual powers are united, reunited in the sacrament. The word appeals to our intellect and may move our will. The sacrament, if its meaning is alive, grasps our unconscious as well as our conscious being. It grasps the creative ground of our being. It is the symbol of nature and spirit, united in salvation.

Therefore, commune with nature! Become reconciled with nature after your estrangement from it. Listen to nature in quietness, and you will find its heart. It will sound forth the glory of its divine ground. It will sigh with us in the bondage of tragedy. It will speak of the indestructible hope of salvation!

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