

REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

SEEING OURSELVES AS A PART OF NATURE: A REFLECTION OF WIDE-EYED WONDERMENT

Audrey Robins

In fall 2018 the Center for Humans and Nature continued its partnership with students from Loyola University Chicago asking them to respond to one of the Questions for a Resilient Future and to share their visions of a culture of conservation.

This time around the Center worked with an interdisciplinary group of undergraduate students from the course, "Environmental Sustainability." They drew from the scholarship and ideas they explored during their environmental studies to develop responses to our Question: "What happens when we see ourselves as separate from or as a part of nature?" We are excited to share Audrey Robins' winning response in this issue of Minding Nature.

We would like to thank Dr. Nancy Landrum from Loyola University Chicago for making this collaboration possible. We hope you enjoy these voices from the next generation of environmental scholars, scientists, activists, and leaders.

Humans have been increasingly distancing themselves from nature in the name of progress. We have separated ourselves from the natural world as if we are not inherently a part of it. We dream of designing a world apart that no longer relies on nature. Is this because of an incessant need to prove to ourselves that our existence is superior and meaningful? To show we have an agency over our lives that other beasts can never possess? We have been running toward the technological power of our species and away from the core of our existence, nature. We have separated ourselves from nature, built our walls, and proclaimed our dominion over all that the world could possibly offer.

And where have our efforts left us? With a sense of loss and foreboding, we seek solace in innovation, fabrication, and control

rather than embracing our tangled interdependence with the living world. We have invented and reinvented the ways in which this world can be utilized, building upon our new reality slowly but surely. We have constructed behemoth cities, learned how to create, prolong, and end life, and discovered ways to re-create nature without the inconveniences that are part and parcel of it.

The innovation that has comforted us and assured us of our power over the natural world is a large part of what has driven us away from it. We have forgotten the gifts of nature, distracting and distancing ourselves with all that we have created. We have become absorbed in our technologies, with the social media that was supposed to bring us closer, with the medical advancements that allow us to pretend that we have some fraction of control over our bodies and our mortality. We have asserted our dominance over all other living beings, defying the natural order through the commodification of natural resources and the industrialization of agriculture. In doing so, we have become self-absorbed, entitled to the world as though we don't share it with countless other forms of life.

We have even begun to forget the beauty of nature. We are becoming disconnected; fewer people have the opportunity to experience nature as we move to cities by the thousands. There is a void left in the human spirit when it is deprived of nature. Most don't even notice the need, the yearning for untouched landscapes, for the wilderness that we may have never seen with our own eyes, yet that we instinctively know lies waiting for us. We taunt ourselves with the brief glimpses we spare for the perfectly timed photo, fooling ourselves to believe that an episode of a show on Animal Planet can reconnect us to the vast landscapes. Even those among us who swear by the concrete—finding comfort in the structures we have created for ourselves, architectural and otherwise—cannot help but feel a small and wordless longing for more than the flash of natural and unabridged freedom felt on a long drive.

When we see ourselves as separate from nature, we deceive ourselves. We separate ourselves from nature, believing that

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there is an untouchable and natural hierarchy that we are not only on top of but also above even participating in. What we fail to realize is that we actively participate in nature every day. Nature is an inherent part of our existence, shaping our interactions with one another and all other beings.

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The term “we” is, of course, broad and general. There are still so many among us who are in tune with nature, with the world around us as it truly is. There are still so many who see themselves as a part of nature and who turn to it for comfort, simplicity, and balance. The comfort we find in the natural world is unmatched, and for those who lean into the call of the wild, rather than running from it, there is immense peace.

Of course, recognizing that we are a part of nature doesn't require a daily ten-mile hike or a cabin in the woods. You can live in the heart of a metropolis and be perfectly content with the idea that we are still one and the same with nature. To do so, we must simply recognize the role nature plays in every moment of our everyday life. Nature effects every single aspect of our lives. Without the resources found in nature's bounty, we could never have built our cities or fed our people.

However, this isn't being a *part* of nature, but rather *using* nature. Recognizing that we are a part of nature is recognizing that we have a responsibility to the planet. If we insist on asserting our dominance over the planet, we cannot just take from it, we must also give back. We must resist our incessant absorption into all things LED and pixelated. We must unplug ourselves every once in a while, redirecting our reverence back toward the art happening all around us, in a natural world curated with more complexity and wonder than special effects technologies can match.

When we tune back into nature, even if only for a short walk down the street, we find ourselves serendipitously centered within ourselves. It can be unnerving to realize that we are just one small piece of the puzzle, while in the same breath, one can very quickly find oneself falling down a rabbit hole of existentialism. You can easily get frazzled and maybe even feel personally responsible for finding a solution for pollution, climate change, the drowning polar bears, all that humans have done to disrespect our precious home. But being a part of nature is to be wholly present in the moment. To accept the brevity and slight irrelevance of the moment, as well as the inherent worth of all the little moments happening all around. When we see ourselves as a part of nature, we find joy and familiarity in the patterns of the natural world—an absurd and contradictory comfort in the fragility of existence—and cannot help but stare wide-eyed in wonder at the perfection all around us.

Audrey Robins is a rising senior studying at Loyola University of Chicago, majoring in Advocacy and Social Change within the School of Communication. She is native to Carmel, Indiana and is an avid roundabout enthusiast and a 2016 graduate of Indianapolis's Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School where her interest in nature and the environment's relationship with society was first peaked by their remarkable science department and a summer marine biology course hosted at Hawai'i Preparatory Academy. She is the proud president of Alpha Chi Omega: Iota Rho, and her current post-graduation plans are to use all of her leadership experience to dive in and change the narrative of corporate social responsibility within the food and agriculture business.