

**Symposium – “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”: The Role of Spirituality in African
American Environmental Activism in the US South**

Give Mother Nature Space in the Movement

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*Justice is first experienced within Nature and then duplicated among humanity. Nature
must be restored as integral to our justice culture.*

This essay is about moving the conversations about nature and environmental justice from national campaigns to practical, on the ground work in real people’s spaces. This movement requires that we walk a path of communion and balance. Communion and balance will not only create space for Mother Nature in our environmental movements, they will create space for Mother Nature to refill our souls with compassion and grace. The tricky part – given that we are speaking to a Western mindset – is not separating the spiritual realities from material realities in the process. A cornerstone of Western philosophy is an either/or mindset and the separation of sacred from secular life. I invite you to enter the African and Eastern mindset that uses the intellectual tools of both/and; plus a mindset that sees spiritual and material realities as intertwined and inseparable. It is the somewhat ephemeral presence of wisdom that people want to separate from daily discourse about healthy living environments for human beings. Wisdom is knowledge achieved through using our intuitive faculties and heart-based intelligence in addition to knowledge gained from using intellectual faculties. And it is precisely that ephemeral presence of wisdom that we want to reinject into human daily behavior.

In the beginning, Wisdom/Mother Nature guided God in the formation of Earth and was in communion with humankind (Proverbs 8 Green Bible New International Version). She found both companions delightful in what I call our first Beloved Community. There was intimate knowledge of one another, communication was respectful and kind. Diverse species were observed; as were boundaries of each other and between one another. Because the human being was created for communion with our Creator, replicating communion is important in many spheres of our lives. Just as we experience communion as we care for one another within our justice movements we must make room for communion in creation. Communion can be explained as those sacred moments when we are in balance with nature, one another, and the Holy One. Communion can be explained as appreciating and operating in harmony with the diversity of ecosystems as they were created. Only when we can maintain personal, internal balance with nature will we have the wherewithal to maintain social balance/justice in society.

Mother Nature as wisdom in this passage is a sentient being to be honored and related to on her own terms. Accordingly, Mother Nature must be seated at the table of the Beloved Community not as a table decoration, but as a voice to be heard and principle to be followed. The Beloved Community is a concept made popular by Martin Luther King Jr. at the end goal of the Civil Rights Movement (The King Center 2019). This philosophy says that all of humanity is meant to live together in harmony with one another. While Martin Luther King Jr. championed the ethical use of environmental wealth, there is no mention of Nature having her own voice or integrity. We unseat Mother Nature when the solutions to climate crises are all human-centered policies to the exclusion of practical solutions which engage us in Earth care. When Mother Nature is heard we revert our lawns back to their original ecosystems and plant food crops as polycultures that interface with animal systems. In performing these simple practices we will re-open our dialogue with Mother Nature and necessarily re-engage her natural cycles of land use and land rest. As we resume natural cycles of work and rest, we regain the abilities to tell time by

the change in atmosphere as the sun rises or sets. We tell seasons by the presence or absence of our favorite song birds. In short, we regain the intimate exchange of thoughts and feelings between ourselves and nature which characterize communion. Right now we don't even recognize that Mother Nature is missing from our environmental movements. If you can unseat your mother from her rightful place and not even realize she is gone, what other atrocities do you become capable of?

Our ability to be a sustainable human race is predicated on our ability to balance our mental, emotional selves within the context of God's Creation. Caring for creation is a blueprint for community care; and a precursor for justice in human society. In order to rectify any injustice, be it economic, racial, or environmental, we must first rectify our relationship to God's creation. Soil & Souls, an emerging mission enterprise, provides resilience work that includes communion with Nature as part of a sustainable justice paradigm. Resilience knowledge that has previously circulated only in elite communities now streams into communities that need the most assistance. Community leaders are exposed to green jobs in food and water systems, ecosystem repair, and solar energy. They are taught that prayer and permaculture/contemplation and creation care go together (Soil & Souls Mission Conference, April 2018, South Carolina).

When Nature is not part of the justice culture, we find activists always on fire and usually burning themselves out. Justice culture usually consists of activists keeping themselves pumped up for a fight. Rather than increase our addiction to fiery fights, we must balance those addictions with the calmness of Earth work and the refreshment of Water service. This can be as simple as organizing meetings where people work in gardens as they chat; or valuing speakers who have a calm message and soothing delivery. Perhaps sit by a fountain on campus and allow reflections to become the text. I maintain balance by rising with the sun everyday and meditating on my oneness with the Divine. This makes me very sensitive to my surroundings and calibrates my emotions and senses with natural rhythms of life. I then have the experience that harmony is

possible in my daily work life. Only within the full embrace of Creation can the human body, mind, and emotions be renewed, refreshed, and restored fully.

Because nature is a consistent prescription to heal ravages of the human psyche, the military uses the sounds of nature to restore a soldiers' humanity after they have experienced constant violence and serial traumas. My training has also revealed that nature techniques are used by disaster relief organizations like N.O.V.A. Likewise when justice workers continuously fight systemic injustice and dysfunction in the community, they also experience traumatic disorders. Therefore to preserve our humanity, activists must also be intentional about embracing the balancing lessons and therapeutic presence of God's creation. Justice can best be restored by those who experience justice in the form of balance. If we want to do justice, we must first be justice.

What we call justice in human society is first called balance in nature. Nature as the epitome of balance is a 24-hour display of harmonic movements. Solar activity is a movement. The jet stream is a movement. The tides are a movement. Seasons of vegetation are movements. Biodiversity flourishes within innate balancing acts. That is the core understanding of justice – human activity operating within a template of Natural Law – not human activity operating within human rules which are often broken.

Therefore all justice work must have a nature element if it is to be sustainable. Our ancestors taught us this through preparing to face violence in the brush arbor. Jack M. Willis (2007), in the *Piney Woods Journal*, explains that a brush arbor was a worship service held in the woods under a shelter made of brush. The services were held to strengthen and encourage enslaved people to seek justice in their everyday life. Jesus embraces several environments in his journey for justice. Look at how he ventures into the garden to pray, always seeking and engaging a space that naturally enhances communion with the Holy One. Having internalized lessons of justice from Nature, he is then able to administer justice in human society.



Often we mistake the tactics we use to achieve justice as justice itself. Justice is a principle such as fairness, a condition such as balance – not a rally or policy or march. These are just some of the many tactics used to achieve justice. The first justice tactics must be internal so that we may experience the spiritual form of justice which is balance. We must be comfortable with balance in our being if we are to achieve justice and be effective agents for change.

References

- The King Center (2019) “The King Philosophy.” <http://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/> (last accessed 17 January 2019)
- Willis J M (2007) Brush arbor meetings were religious affairs. *The Piney Woods Journal* July <http://www.thepineywoods.com/BrushArborJly07.htm> (last accessed 17 January 2019)