

Blessedly Scything with God

You Are Invited

During the journey before us, I want to take you to many ordinary places. This story begins in a field at Hunts Corner, in rural, southwestern Maine, in the foothills of New Hampshire's White Mountains. For me, this is a place of knowing. I invite you to join me in that field.

BLESSEDLY SCYTHING WITH GOD: A PLACE OF KNOWING

My grandchildren who are old enough to be aware of such things know that I love to scythe. My children know that for sure. They all have seen me swinging my scythe out on the backfield that separates our plain nineteenth-century farmhouse from the wooded slopes beyond. Every fall, I scythe that swath of variously sized and elegantly configured ferns and purple asters and goldenrod and yarrow and meadow rue and daisies and black-eyed Susans and evening primroses and the differentiated patches of stunning grasses and the innumerable seedlings of white pine, ash, maple, birch, and meadowsweet—and I do so with a passion.

Why this passion for scything? The exercise itself, to begin with, is good. I work hard to take care of this tired old body. There is something, too, about scything that focuses the mind and quiets the heart, notwithstanding all of the physical effort required. In fields that have not been tilled for many years, such as ours, the scyther must carefully attend to the sometimes bulging contours of the land, so as not to jam the carefully sharpened blade into the coarse, rocky soil. As one attains a rhythm with the swinging scythe, one must see through the jungle of plants in front of one's feet and adjust the course of the scythe in flight, so as to be able to cut the plants as closely as possible to the earth and

yet to avoid that jarring experience, that dull thud, that clanking, which results from faulty swings when the blade jams into the soil. When the swing is right, however, and the blade is sharp, the cutting feels effortless. In my experience, the scyther is then attuned to the rhythm of the field. Such moments always leave me contented. But there are other benefits of scything, too.

Scything keeps our backfield from turning into part of the forest, as it would quickly do without that kind of yearly attention. I do not mean to demean the forest by any means. The trees on those slopes north of our field have their own awesome standing, without a doubt, especially the colossal, hundred-year-old white pines. Over the years, some of us have explored the edges of those woods, which sweep far beyond our property to the north. One time, my wife, Laurel, and I took our two kids—then not yet teenagers—in tow and ventured up into the heart of the forest. With compass in hand, we bushwhacked our way to the top of neighboring Round Mountain, a small hill compared to the Presidential Mountains twenty miles to the west but still a remarkable capsule of wilderness in its own right, with no trails at that time or logging roads. That adventure, modest as it was, tested the four of us and inspired us for the better part of a day, particularly when we contemplated the vistas of the westerly mountains from a break in the trees near the summit.

Family members and friends know, too, that I have carved out some ascending and descending trails along the edge of the woods at the base of Round Mountain. I love to walk there, and to think about what lies beyond and above. For me, that forest has its own compelling majesty.

But the field has its particular kind of meaning, too, which I want to help preserve. Hence, my scything. Without that work, the forest would overtake the field in no time—with ash trees, for example. During the first few weeks of the spring following my fall scything, hundreds of ash seedlings soon sprout up to a height of maybe ten inches. They are already tiny trees by the time the next fall rolls around. So, if you want to have a field, as I do, you must care for it, lest the forest take over.

The field as I see it—a thought that reflects the perspective of some New England transcendentalists—mediates between our house, on the one hand, with its perennial and vegetable gardens and its modest lawns, and the forest beyond, on the other hand, where one can catch signs of the bears and moose and foxes and other creatures of the wilds that sometimes edge their ways toward our house, or where one can contemplate the red-tailed hawks and the crows, the swallows and the goldfinches, the hummingbirds and the doves, the grouse and the wild turkeys, and the occasional purple grosbeak or downy woodpecker, all of which soar above or fly nearby or otherwise announce their

presence from time to time. A few years ago, up the hill road about a mile from our house, my daughter even encountered a lynx. That great cat was crossing our road as my daughter drove along at dusk. She was dumbfounded. As she slowed her car and watched, that astounding creature stopped and looked back at her for a moment before disappearing into the woods. The whole area where I scythe is a rich meeting place for many creatures, myself included.

I will not say much about other creatures from the wild side of things that occasionally invade what we like to think of as *our* space on *our* side of the field, including the deer that sometimes blatantly stand there in mutual contemplation with us as they munch our hostas, and the woodchucks that devour too many of our kohlr seedlings and delphinium buds (over the course of one summer, I caught three woodchucks in our have-a-heart trap as well as a cat; one other summer I caught a skunk), and the raccoons that feast on our corn the day before we intend to harvest it.

I don't want to have to tell you about the vicious thoughts that sometimes occupy my mind when I witness what I consider the havoc those wild animals wreak on *our* gardens—thoughts that do not fit well with the image of the gentle grandfather that I like to believe my grandchildren hold. Notwithstanding my occasionally violent thoughts about such “invaders,” though, I do love the field, as well as the woods beyond. So I scythe the field once a year in contentment, not just for the exercise but also for the sake of reaffirming its right to be and its larger meanings.

THE DARKER SIDE OF SCYTHING

Scything brings with it more than good exercise and the preservation of beautiful spaces between our house and the woods. You need to understand this, if you don't already. In our part of the world, the scyther must contend with blackflies or mosquitoes or ticks, all messengers of pain in their own ways, depending on the season and the rain. Once, more ominously, my scythe dislodged a nest of mud daubers, a kind of wasp that is called a black-faced hornet by the locals, tucked at the base of some high, thick grass. When I instantly realized what I had done, it was already too late. They were upon me in droves.

In response, I ran faster than I think I have ever run, at least since the days I played soccer in high school. I ran as urgently as I did not only to avoid the onslaught of the wasp stings, which already were painful enough, but also to save my life. Many years before, when I was in my thirties, I had been stung on my leg by three such creatures in a New Hampshire forest and had had to

limp back to my car and drive to an emergency room, twenty miles away, in shock. I could have died, due to what I learned for the first time to be a severe allergy to insect bites. So, as I ran away from those mud daubers whose hive I had unknowingly sliced in half with my scythe, I was well aware that that dash of mine to safety might have been (but, thankfully, was not) my last. In this respect, in addition to the good exercise and honoring the integrity of the field, scything also keeps me honest about the world of nature. All of the wonderful creatures of God's good earth are not always our friends. Only people who never leave their homes or their automobiles or their offices can believe such a fantasy.

This brings me to a still darker truth that I sometimes ponder while I am scything, with particular reference to *our* field. We call that field "the pipeline." For me, that bland expression is not bland at all. It affects my consciousness like the thunder and lightning that occasionally roll over our house and gardens and the field and on into the woods beyond and above. Our field covers, in very small measure, a pipeline that day and night delivers oil hundreds of miles from Portland, Maine, to Montreal, Canada. Sometimes helicopters from the pipeline company shatter the silence of the field as they roar by at low altitudes and high speeds, inspecting that pipeline. It can be frightening. So, on any given day as I scythe, I think of that fateful black gold pulsing through the pipe buried beneath my feet, and I realize how deeply my own world in rural Maine is bound up with the dynamics of globalized industrial society everywhere, with the threats and the realities of warfare in the Middle East, in particular, and with global warming, more generally.

An image then sometimes hovers over my mind, especially in the aftermath of one of those helicopter flyovers: the grim reaper of death of course carries a scythe! Forces are at work around the globe in our times that threaten the very existence of human life on this planet and the lives of many other creatures as well. Don't those forces—which New Testament Christians thought of as the "principalities and powers" of death—dwarf in significance anything that transpires in one minuscule life like mine, hidden away at times out in the field and surrounded by what some think of as nature's "pristine beauty"? What is my scything, however good and beautiful it might be in my own eyes, and by extension for the lives of those near and dear to me, compared to that global scything by those principalities and powers?

Still, I typically scythe in peace—how this is humanly possible in these times of global crisis and cosmic alienation is one of the underlying themes of this book—and I hope to continue to do so as long as I have the strength that this idiosyncratic practice requires, because when I scythe, in addition to everything

else, beyond the good and the beautiful and the ominous and the portentous, I am blessedly engaged with *God* in nature. As I look down the sloping field as it flows westward toward a valley, beyond which the White Mountains—some of the oldest of this nation—rise into view, and as I then lift up my eyes to those mountains themselves—especially on a clear fall day, when the bright colors of the maples and birches and beeches and the more somber hues of the oaks stand over against the dark figures of the white pines and the hemlocks—I see the grandeur of God.

SCYTHING AND GARDENING

There is more. My family members have seen me raking up all those cuttings from the scything year after year and wheeling them to stack in large piles near our gardens. They have heard me refer to those piles as our “green manure.” That is what those piles become. In a year or two, they decay into good nutrients for our vegetable garden, where I spread them and dig them in. In this way, the field serves the garden by helping its plants to flourish, along with the other natural nutrients we occasionally add to the soil, such as cow manure and green sand. When I lift and push wheelbarrows of green manure from the pipeline toward our gardens to be composted or when I spread the cow manure or scatter the green sand, and thereafter, in due course, when I kneel down on the earth to weed the vegetable seedlings, I am lifting and pushing and spreading and scattering and weeding in prayer—because “the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof” (Psalm 24:1) and the Lord is there, I believe, in, with, and under every furrow of the soil and every glorious green shoot, both the seedlings and the weeds. I am kneeling there on holy ground.

I am particularly grateful for our vegetable garden. Sometimes, scythe in hand, as I catch my breath out on the field, I look across the little stream that runs between the field where I’m working and marvel at that vegetable garden. It has a life of its own, just like the field where I scythe. The growing season in western Maine is short (neighbors still repeat the story of a killer frost in July a hundred years ago), but after decades of work, our soil is good and the fruits of that good earth are usually plentiful.

It’s a joy, too, to eat from the garden, in due season. For us, it is akin to a liturgical calendar. There are the salad season, the zucchini and yellow squash season, the tomato season, the potato season, and the kohlrabi season, each with its own eating rituals. The word *fecundity* comes to mind. I have a photograph on my desk of Laurel holding a huge armful of chard, half as big as she is. She

freezes the harvest of those seasons, as much as she can, and so we eat from our garden virtually the whole year.

I have no illusions that we could get by “living from the land.” But that vegetable garden is nevertheless a gift of unmerited grace. Not the least of such a grace, for us, is the “veggie feasts” that we host for family and friends, three or four times during the growing season. Those feasts, with all their homegrown and home-cooked delicacies covering our table and all the personal warmth around that table, are unmerited grace multiplied. Laurel does the cooking, and I do the cleaning up when all have gone home, with the responsibility of finding a way to store the plentiful leftovers in the refrigerator or the freezer. For me, those quiet moments are like the times after the Sunday liturgy when I have washed the chalice and cared for the bread and the wine that remained after that meal and felt the holy silence envelop me.

SCYTHING WITH GOD

From time to time, my grandchildren, when they were young, have wandered out to the vegetable garden where I was kneeling or to the field beyond to visit with me while I scythed, maybe to pick blueberries while we chatted. At such times, I have often been reminded that Jesus taught that a little child shall lead us. I have seen God in the faces of my grandchildren. I aspire, as a matter of fact, to see nature through a child’s eyes. A spirituality of nature developed in the Christian tradition wants to be childlike, as Jesus announced, to be innocent as a dove, as well as to cultivate its own worldly wisdom, like a fox, as Jesus also taught.

In this and many other ways, I am blessedly engaged with God in nature at Hunts Corner, especially when I scythe. It may be the face of a child or the faces of the mountains or even the black-faced hornets. By the grace of God, in those moments I am almost always enthusiastic, according to the root meaning of that word, “in God” (Greek, *en theos*). I love scything with God. I’m elated all the more at such times, too, because I often self-consciously see myself as part of larger, interconnected worlds, of the ecology of that place in western Maine, and more particularly of the fructuous vegetable garden and of Laurel’s small but elegant perennial garden celebrating the colors yellow, blue, and red, a garden into which she pours enormous energies, and of our Hidden Garden (more on this later). I then contemplate beyond in every direction the fragile biosphere, which is so preciously layered around this earth, and the domains of our sun and our galaxy all around us, among the billions and billions of other

galaxies—and God, in, with, and under it all, hovering, giving birth to all things as this universe’s creative and life-giving Spirit.

But which God is this? To respond to this question, my bifocal narrative must now shift from contemplation of “nature and nature’s God,” as I scythe with God and survey our gardens, which are gifts of grace from the hands of God, to the knowledge of this God that had already been graciously given to me by God *before* I began to scythe and to contemplate the world in which I scythe. This gift, as I have experienced it, in a certain sense precedes my contemplation of nature and nature’s God. It is thus a gift in the second sense of my title, *Before Nature*. Long before I ever stood before nature in contemplation at Hunts Corner, engaged with nature, my life had been claimed by the very God with whom I there was blessedly scything.

SCYTHING WITH THE GOD OF MY BAPTISM: NAMING THE GOD OF THIS BLESSEDNESS

Since this is a personal story, it will naturally have many personal points of reference. The narrative of my scything with God begins in the middle of my life (*in media res*). The historic beginnings of my spiritual story are to be found many decades before that, at Resurrection Lutheran Church, in Buffalo, New York, where I was baptized in 1935, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” (This archaic “ghost” language was standard back then, and it is still used in some hymns and prayers today. I use it myself, on occasion.)

If you were to ask me about the God with whom I scythe, this would probably be what I would say on most occasions: the God whose grandeur I contemplate reflected and refracted in nature as I encounter that grandeur in and around Hunts Corner in southwestern Maine is none other than the God in whose name I was baptized as an infant. I am not proposing to justify this statement here but, rather, simply to describe what it means to me. This is the way things have worked, and continue to work, for me spiritually. My spirituality was bifocal, in the sense that I have been using that word in this book, long before that kind of descriptive language was available to me. So, when I tell you about my blessed engagement with nature, know that I believe that the God of my Hunts Corner world and the God of Resurrection Lutheran Church, in Buffalo, New York, are the same God, and that I have so believed for as long as I can remember.

A BAPTISMAL MYSTICISM

Baptism was a major event in churches like the one in which I was splashed, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in 1935. It was celebrated robustly, both in the life of the infant's family and in the life of the congregation of which that family was a member. This was not just for ceremonial reasons. Whether or not they could readily find the words to say it, the members of such congregations knew in their bones that a baptism was much more than a name giving or the mere celebration of the birth of a healthy child or a way of doting on the cuteness of a baby. Many of the members firmly believed that some profoundly gracious and irrevocably lifelong transaction between God and the child, and the community of faith, was being established by the sacrament of Baptism, with the water and with God's word of promise.

I grew up with that heritage, and then I found it enriched in my seminary years when I was exposed to the baptismal theology of the sixteenth-century protestant reformer Martin Luther, the patriarch of the tradition according to whose canons I myself had been baptized. Luther, as I will note often as this story unfolds, had a profound sense for the immediacy of God in nature. For Luther, nature was a *mask* of God (*larva Dei*), but it was surely for him also a *mask of God*. God was deeply and pervasively "in, with, and under" the world of nature. For Luther, nature was not quite "the theater of God's glory" as it was for Luther's fellow protestant reformer John Calvin, nor was it the world revealed by the ecstatic visions of the modern Jesuit poet G. M. Hopkins, for whom the whole creation is "charged with the grandeur of God." Still, for Luther, nature was astoundingly permeated, through and through, with the powerful presence of God. If you truly were to understand a grain of wheat, Luther once observed, you would die of wonder.

Strikingly, Luther gave voice to that same kind of profound sense for the presence of God in nature when the reformer talked about Baptism. For him, the very God who is in, with, and under all things is also revealingly and graciously present in the waters of Baptism. In those waters, according to Luther, when God's word of promise is spoken, God discloses Godself not just as an immediate and powerful presence but all the more so as a self-giving, gracious, and faithful presence. For Luther, these two themes—God in nature generally and God in Baptism particularly—are thoroughly and inseparably wedded. Such thoughts sometimes percolate to my own consciousness when I am scything. The God whom I encounter in nature when I am scything, as I have said, is for me the very God in whose name I once was baptized.

And there is more. Since my seminary years, drawing on a lifetime's fascination with water and inspired by Luther's spirituality of God in, with, and

under nature, a certain baptismal mysticism has found a home in my soul. It began with a kind of love for water when I was a child. Maybe I never got over that “oceanic feeling” that Sigmund Freud postulated that infants feel in the womb. Freud thought that religion has its roots in this feeling. Be that as it may, I have loved water for as long as I can remember. I was a good swimmer as a child, and later swam competitively in high school and college. In my youngest years, I eagerly spent countless hours during summers, floating and paddling and submerging myself in the shoreline waters at nearby Lake Erie or at inland ponds and streams, where my parents often took me and my siblings. I found a kind of peace and solitude and sense of ultimate well-being in such experiences.

As a boy, moreover, I was tutored by my parents in gardening. It was often my chore—in fact, much more than a chore for me—to water what in those World War II days we called our “victory garden.” To this day, I am the one in the family who drags the hoses around our Maine home to water the gardens. I still relish the experience. In the privacy of my own soul, indeed, I sometimes imagine myself to be a kind of latter-day Adam caring for the garden of God, as the biblical Adam was called to do. For years, I have also savored all the biblical texts—and there are many—that envision God’s salvation coming to renew the face of the earth through the blessings of water.¹

BAPTISM AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF WATER

On the other hand, who can think about such blessings of water without pondering their maldistribution and their desecration in our global society today? The are such precious blessings but so often hoarded by the rich and the powerful and then left despoiled for the poor! More than a billion people do not have enough water to drink in our time, and waterborne diseases afflict the poor around the world more than any other threat to their well-being. Thus, I cannot think of water these days without bringing to mind and heart the deep-seated injustices of our global society.

The theme of water also brings with it the challenges of confronting the occasionally profound destructiveness of water gone wild. I have rarely found myself romanticizing the experience of water and its blessings. Water, in general human experience, has often been larger than life, sometimes a force of death and destruction. My family visited Niagara Falls frequently when I was a boy—a story that I will tell at length later—and I learned at an early age not only to stand in awe of those waters but sometimes, when I carefully positioned myself behind the wire fence at the edge of the top of the falls, to stand in terror.

It is no wonder that the many biblical references to the primeval waters of the creation and the flooding of the cosmic waters registered so deeply in my soul when I began to ponder those texts in my seminary years. Along the way in my studies, too, when I discovered the powerful idea of the wrath of God in Luther's spirituality and, more particularly, in his teachings about the hidden God, I began to speak not only about the beauties and mysteries of nature but also about the terrors of nature. I think of such things frequently when I wander along the forbidding rocky coasts of Maine most summers. I do believe that the Spirit of God is working powerfully in those waters, as the towering waves slam against the ancient rocks, but the vista still terrifies me.² I know that I have to keep my distance.³

All of these apperceptions of water have surrounded me spiritually, I have no doubt, when I have been called upon to baptize, particularly when, as part of the baptismal liturgy, I have been privileged to recite Luther's great "Flood Prayer":

Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father: We give you thanks, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and you created heaven and earth. By the gift of water you nourish and sustain us and all living things.

By the waters of the flood you condemned the wicked and saved those whom you had chosen, Noah and his family. You led Israel by the pillar of cloud and fire though the sea, out of slavery into the freedom of the promised land. In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit. By the baptism of his own death and resurrection your beloved Son has set us free from the bondage to sin and death, and has opened the way to the joy and freedom of everlasting life. He made water a sign of the kingdom and of cleansing and rebirth. In obedience to his command, we make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. . . .⁴

As I recite—or, rather, incant—those words while the water is being poured, a strange and stirring sense of the immediacy of God and God's grace often overwhelms me. When I am all the more privileged to baptize by submersion, as I was for my own son and his sons, I can only describe my sensation as being charged with the very energy of God.

And there is still more. In, with, and under those waters and those sacramental actions, announced by the word of God, I believe that the “God of grace and God of Glory” that one of my favorite hymns announces is bonding eternally with the person being baptized. At such moments, I do not worry about such more or less abstract theological questions as whether all *have* to be baptized in order to be saved (the gracious answer to that question, to which I wholeheartedly subscribe, is no). I am simply overwhelmed by the love and power and gentleness of God’s presence and God’s promise at that moment. Such are some of the configurations of what I think of as my own baptismal mysticism, rooted as they undoubtedly are in the contemplative moments with water that I have experienced all my life.

So, it makes perfect inner sense to me, and I feel that it could be no other way for me, to say that the God whom I encounter scything in a field in southwestern Maine is the very God who once claimed my life in Baptism and who charges my soul whenever I officiate at the Baptism of another. Hence, the story of my blessed engagement with nature is a narrative of a *Christian* spirituality of nature. My story, as I stressed at the outset, takes the classical Trinitarian faith of the Christian church for granted. It presupposes that, *for me*, there is no other God than the God of my Baptism, who is addressed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵

THE AMBIGUITIES OF BAPTISM

Still, I know that Christian particulars like Baptism and the Trinitarian name of God sometimes rub the spiritual seekers of our world the wrong way.⁶ The very subtitle of this book, *A Christian Spirituality*, may sound to some like a contradiction in terms. What does the Christian teaching about the Trinity have to do with spirituality, and vice versa? The culture of the spiritual seekers that I discussed at the start more often than not takes for granted that matters such as Baptism and its Trinitarian language are somehow narrow or even destructive expressions of “religion” over against what are perceived to be the more general and more humanizing insights and practices of “spirituality.” I have discussed this popular passion for spirituality over against religion in the preceding pages as well as elsewhere.⁷ Here, I simply want to observe that, for me, the two are inseparable, spirituality *and* religion (if we are going to use those terms). It could not be otherwise for the bifocal perspective that I am presupposing in this narrative. I ask the spiritual seekers whom I am venturing to address in this book to hear me out on this one, and then only to decide

whether it does indeed make sense, as I believe it does, to speak of—as in my subtitle—“*a Christian spirituality.*”

Ponder this question. Do not those of us who are Christians have the right, and indeed, in these times when the whole earth is “groaning in travail,” the obligation, to set forth the spiritual meanings of our own encounters with nature, just as much as Native Americans, Buddhists, Hindus, and others undeniably have the right and obligation to do? Indeed, on a more global scale, how will any genuine kind of “interreligious dialogue” about the earth groaning in travail ever emerge if all the conversation partners in such a dialogue are not encouraged to set forth the diverse particularities of their own religious traditions?

In this spirit, I am inviting you who are spiritual seekers to join me on a pilgrimage of exploration guided by the baptismal trail markers of the classical Christian tradition, which have been so critically important for my own spiritual life from its very beginnings.⁸ And, I am inviting those of you who are theology teachers and pastoral practitioners to come along, too, to do your best to assess whether this kind of journey is indeed faithful to the classical theological tradition and whether it will help you in your own conversations with the spiritual seekers and perhaps also with your own, personal spiritual journeys.

This particular and self-conscious attention to Christian trail markers is all the more poignantly necessary given that, in the eyes of some, and perhaps many, such a journey must be begun under dark clouds of historical suspicion. It is widely taken for granted these days by those whom the great protestant theologian of the nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher called the “cultured despisers of religion,” as well as by numerous popular proponents of various kinds of “post-Christian” spiritualities, that Christianity bears what historian Lynn White Jr. famously—or infamously—called in 1966 “a huge burden of guilt” for the global ecological crisis today. This is the ecological complaint against Christianity to which I referred at the outset. More than a few in our time are sure that Christianity is ecologically bankrupt and therefore that Christianity can have little of substance and value to say about nature, spiritually or in any other way.

This is not the place to explore and assess this ecological complaint against Christianity. Much of my previously published theological work can be read as a response to that kind of criticism of the Christian tradition.⁹ But since the thought that the Christian faith has nothing of value to say about the world of nature is “out there” in our culture, shared by many spiritual seekers and even taught in some university departments of environmental studies, it does

makes sense—and it is only fair—to ask that the Christian tradition be allowed to speak with its own voice, to have its own day in court, before jumping to any conclusions about what it does or does not have to say about nature.¹⁰

GUIDEPOSTS FOR THE JOURNEY:

ON THE MEANINGS OF “NATURE” AND “SPIRITUALITY”

To facilitate understanding of these spiritual explorations, I want to say something about the meaning of two key terms in my title, *nature* and *spirituality*, lest these historically loaded constructs end up being a barrier, rather than a gateway, to understanding.

NATURE

Regarding the first term, *nature*, I would like to say simply this: *nature is the world I encounter when I am scything*. But that is obviously too compact of a definition. So let me unpack it, as best as I briefly can. By “nature,” I do *not* mean what the natural scientists generally mean by that term: a self-enclosed universe (or a self-enclosed world of universes) that may or may not be emergent or in process and which more or less runs by itself, unfolding according to its own laws. Methodologically, if not personally, most natural scientists shy away from or resolutely resist any idea of the divine in conjunction with the idea of nature thus understood. I readily accept that kind of a definition as valid for the natural sciences, as predicated on a methodology for research. Indeed, the theological definition of nature that I will soon propose is intended to be “consonant” with this kind of scientific usage of the term.¹¹ In other words, I believe that scientists and theologians are talking about the same world but that each discipline sees that world from its own perspective.

Nor do I take the term *nature* to mean what some romantic poets and philosophers have meant when they have thought of “Nature” (capitalized) as a kind of self-contained (albeit open-ended) yet thoroughly divine universe, sometimes thought of as “Nature giving birth to itself” or “Nature naturing” (*Natura naturans*), a world that is replete with great mysteries and resplendent with profound beauties, a world in which you can lose yourself. For romantic thinking, generally, God *is* nature and vice versa (*Deus sive natura*). With the classical theological tradition, I reject that kind of pantheistic thinking, which essentially identifies God with the world. On the other hand, I deeply appreciate what might be called romantic sensibilities. Thoreau would be a case in point.

I believe that the theological definition of nature I will propose has a certain consonance with romantic apperceptions of nature, as it also does with scientific encounters with nature. The vision of God depicted in these pages points to a God who is magnificently and powerfully and beautifully in, with, and under, as well as beyond, all things.

Nor again am I employing the term *nature*, not even implicitly, to refer to that alleged world of “resources” imagined by both capitalist and socialist societies—sometimes under the quasi-theological rubric of “the stewardship of nature”—a world whose chief *raison d’être* is to serve as “the means of production” that will, in turn, undergird what is sometimes thought of as “human progress.”¹² Nature is not that so-called world of materials, which gains its meaning solely when it is mined or otherwise transformed for human purposes. On the other hand, I by no means think that appropriate human engagement with the world we call nature should be scorned. On the contrary, with many others, I am deeply convinced that humans, especially in this era of global crisis, must work with nature proactively, effectively, and carefully—in the root sense of the latter word, with caring—for the sake of promoting justice for all of the oppressed human and other creatures of this good earth.

Rather, I am using the term *nature*, as it can be configured theologically in light of the Trinitarian, creedal traditions of the church, to refer—as I noted at the very beginning of these explorations—to *the material-vital aspect of God’s good creation*, what the Nicene Creed speaks of as “all things visible.”¹³ This, in the end, brings me back to my preferred, more compact definition of the term: nature is the visible, tangible world I encounter in and around my home in southwestern Maine, charged as that world is with the grandeur of God and also showing as it does telltale signs of human use and abuse—the house, the gardens, the field, the pipeline, the forest, the mountains, the sky, the “starry heavens” beyond, and my own bodily engagement with it all. Nature thus understood also refers to my own bodily interaction with other, similarly embodied humans—picking up and hugging a three-year-old grandchild, for example.

I want to emphasize two parts of this definition. First, I am assuming that material human artifacts—such as our Maine house and, of course, my scythe—are part of nature. This world of human artifacts is sometimes called “the built environment.”¹⁴ Second, I am also assuming that the human body is part of nature. From the air we humans breathe and the water we drink and the food we eat to our sexuality, our DNA, our evolutionary history, and our ecological interrelatedness with the biosphere more generally, as bodily creatures we humans are essentially and inextricably and wondrously immersed

in nature. Water, for example, which covers some 70 percent of planet Earth, also constitutes some 70 percent of our bodies. Nature, in other words, is not just the world of our gardens and the fields and forests and mountains and the vast expanses of the universe beyond. Nature is *everything material and living that God wondrously creates* (sometimes working through human intelligence and human-made machines and human hands). This inclusive theological understanding of the term *nature*, I know, does not answer all of the questions that surround it, but at least it points us in a direction that I hope will facilitate rather than hinder meaningful explorations of the theme of this book.

SPIRITUALITY

“Spirituality” is a different kind of construct. Unlike “nature,” the word itself does not have explicit, centuries-old layers of meaning, although spiritual practices, such as praying in solitude or in small groups, and reflections about those practices have of course been common in Christianity as well as in other religions in all eras. While the word *spirituality* has deep and ancient roots, in other words, it has become a widely used *term* mainly in our own era. Moreover, it appears that, due to its relatively recent popularization, if for no other reason, the word *spirituality* can mean many different things to many different people.¹⁵ I propose a relatively simple definition of the term, mainly to allow us to get under way in these explorations and to not have to take a long terminological detour at the outset. I understand the term *spirituality* to mean *religious experience that is intense and transforming*.¹⁶

Please note what this definition does *not* do. It does not frame the term in opposition to “religion,” a familiar practice in our culture today that I have already discussed. Spirituality, as I am employing the term, *could* mean the individual testimony of the proverbial guru sitting alone on top of a mountain where he or she voices a worldview and champions a variety of practices solely on the basis of his or her own private intuitions, and perhaps in reaction to the claims of one or more traditional religions. Or it *could just as readily* be—as indeed I am taking it to mean in this narrative—the testimony and the practices of a believer that arise out of a particular religious tradition and the communal expressions of that tradition. In other words, the definition I am proposing is large enough to encompass what is popularly thought of as “religion.” Hence, I am quite comfortable discussing Baptism—that central rite of the Christian religion—as the heart of my own spirituality. The first-person

religious discourse of this book, and the intense, transformative experience it presupposes, has that particular religious source and inspiration.¹⁷

Our next step as we continue to consider the journey before us will be to examine the general importance of *practices* for the spiritual life and, more particularly, to review the emergence in my own life of a single practice that I call “the Trinity Prayer.” This prayer is deeply rooted in baptismal meanings, beginning with the classical biblical witness to those meanings in the Gospel of Matthew, where the disciples hear from the risen Lord that they are to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

Notes

1. For a helpful, short introduction to such biblical texts, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Water in Biblical Reflection,” *Word and World* 32, no. 1 (winter 2012): 42–50. For an insightful study of water in the context of worship, see Benjamin Stewart, *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth’s Ecology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).

2. This discussion steers around the even more difficult challenge of dealing with the enormities of “natural disasters” like tsunamis. I will take up this issue of “natural evil” later in this narrative.

3. One place I like to visit along the southern coast of Maine is Pemaquid Point. I read a few years ago about two young parents who had taken their two preteen children to that place and how they all had innocently wandered far out onto the point at low tide to get closer to the waves. Sadly, the two children somehow fell into the incoming tidal waters and drowned, and the parents did so, too, in their futile efforts to save the children.

4. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 122.

5. I will suggest alternate, albeit subsidiary, ways of speaking of the Trinity, in particular the functional expressions *Giver*, *Gift*, and *Giving*, in chapter 6. But praying to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remains for me the primary way to address God, the Father of the Son, made known to me by the Holy Spirit. See Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 54: “To recognize the metaphorical dimensions to ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ does not make these symbols exchangeable with other terms. . . . There is only one Trinitarian formula: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is because it is tied inextricably to the event of revelation and salvation itself. . . . To bypass the biblical terms in favor of some substitutes is to identify with a God other than the God of Jesus Christ.”

6. During the same period in my life when I was learning to scythe, I was also serving as the chaplain of a women’s school, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts. Early on in those years, I arranged for a young scholar from the theology department of Boston College, Mary Daly, to preach in the Wellesley College chapel. Daly was just then in the process of writing a book that would become a classic of feminist theology, provocatively entitled *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1974). Since those days, I have wrestled with what Daly called the patriarchal language of classical Christianity. One of my first published articles argued that the “Our Father” of the Lord’s Prayer should, according to the best canons of scholarly translation–praxis, be rendered “Our Parent” (H. Paul Santmire, “Retranslating ‘Our Father’: The Urgency and the Possibility,” *Dialog* 16, no. 2 [spring 1977]: 101–6.) On the other hand, in those days and to the present, I have made it a practice to keep baptizing in the triune name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, given its biblical roots its historic, theological

particularity, and its centrality in classical Christianity. I would like to think, however, that this practice represents postfeminist, rather than prefeminist, understandings. I am, in any case, very much aware that the discussion of patriarchal language in Christian life and thought must continue. As a framework for that continuing discussion, see Ted Peters, “Is Trinitarian Language Hopelessly Sexist?” in *God as Trinity*, 46–55. Peters quotes Patricia Wilson-Kastner (51) in order to point the discussion in the direction that he wants to recommend: “Trinity is more supportive of feminist values than is a strict monotheism. . . . Put very simply, if one imagines God as three persons, it encourages one to focus on interrelationship as the core of divine reality, rather than on a single personal reality, almost always imagined as male.”

7. See H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 57–78.

8. The reader may well wish to explore, in due course or in parallel, the pathways forged by other religions or other spiritual worldviews. A good place to begin such religious studies is the multivolume series on religion and ecology edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker. See Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Tucker and John Berthrong, eds., *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Tucker and Christopher Key Chapple, *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). While demanding for those who are just beginning to explore such things, these volumes generally present balanced pictures of the religious traditions under discussion.

9. See the preface, note 13.

10. For a brief and accessible but also comprehensive theological statement of a biblically oriented ecological theology for today, see the essay by the New Testament scholar and long-standing church activist David Rhoads: “Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 15, no. 1 (autumn 2012), 1–49.

11. I have learned much over the years about the relationships between theology and the sciences from Ted Peters, who has made much of the conceptuality of consonance. See, for example, his introductory essay in *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 11–27.

12. For my reservations more generally about the stewardship construct, see my book, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 251–258.

13. For a more detailed discussion of this definition, see my book *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 11f.

14. See T. J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

15. Consider the following popularizing definition, which appeared in a Mayo Clinic newsletter, *EmbodyHealth*, December 2009, 2 (distributed by the Board of Pensions, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America): “Spirituality is the way or ways you find meaning and purpose in your life, and for many, it’s a connection to something greater than yourself. Spirituality can be nourished through many different traditions or rituals.” More succinctly, see also Roger S. Gottlieb, *Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5: “In its broadest terms, spirituality is an understanding of how life should be lived and an attempt to live that way.” The sharpest generic definition of spirituality that I have encountered is by Sandra M. Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). She distinguishes between spirituality as a lived experience (which is my concern in this book) and spirituality as an academic discipline. This is her definition of the former: “Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (1).

16. If I were to be more specific at this point, I would want to identify *Christian* spirituality as a particularized expression of the generic definition I am proposing. This is done very well by Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994): “Spirituality has to do with our experiencing God and with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as outcomes of that experience. Since God is in principle available to everyone, spirituality is not exclusively Christian. Christian spirituality is life in the Holy Spirit who incorporates the Christian into the body of Jesus Christ, through whom the Christian has access to God the creator in a life of faith, hope, love, and service. It is *visionary, sacramental, and transformational*” (1058, italics in original). On the motif of intensity, see Lawrence S. Cunningham, “Catholic Spirituality: What Does It Mean Today?” *Commonweal* 133, no. 4 (February 24, 2006): 12. The theme of intensification is also suggested by Louis Dupré in his historical study, *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its Development by Jan Ruysbroeck* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 53: “The mystical life does not consist in an abrupt alteration of consciousness, but rather in an evermore intensively conscious recurrence of the same divine rhythm. It is a rhythm of which every devout person has had a least some experience.”

17. For a more analytical discussion of this topic, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus* 3:2 (fall 2003), 163–185. She makes a case for understanding religion and spirituality in partnership, which is the approach that I am taking here.