

The Mystic Universe in My Back Yard

by Samuel Logan Brengle

Samuel Logan Brengle's sermon explores the profound spiritual insights found in the beauty of nature within one's own backyard.

Scripture: Genesis 1:31, Job 12:7-10, Psalm 19:1, Psalm 104:24-25, Psalm 148:1-5, Ecclesiastes 3:11, Isaiah 40:26, Matthew 6:26, Luke 12:27-28, Romans 1:20

Topics: "Spirituality", "Nature"

Description

Samuel Logan Brengle reflects on the profound beauty and spiritual significance of nature found in his own back yard, contrasting it with the teachings of St. Paul, who did not emphasize the wonders of creation. He shares his journey of discovering the intimate relationship between God and nature, finding solace and healing in the simple yet profound elements of his surroundings. Brengle emphasizes that the universe is not only vast and grand but also intricately present in the small details of life, leading him to worship and gratitude for the beauty around him.

Transcript

I but open my eyes -- and perfection, no more and no less, In the kind I imagined full fronts me, and God is seen God In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul, and in the clod. -- Browning

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortes when, with eagle eyes, He stared at the Pacific.

-- Keats --

I am discovering a universe in my back-yard. I am not sure that I lived so intimately with my darling little wife as I have for forty years lived with St. Paul. Far more constantly and intimately than he lived and traveled with his friend Barnabas and his young lieutenants, Silas, Titus, Epaphroditus, and Timothy, has he lived, traveled, slept, and talked with me, only I did the sleeping. I never found him napping. At any hour of the day or night he was waiting wide-awake and ready for me.

A text in John's first Epistle and another in his Gospel proved to be the open door to my soul, leading into the holy of holies, into the experience of cleansing, and the spiritual vision and inward revelation of Christ. But I think Paul has been my greatest teacher, my mentor, my most intimate spiritual guide. But one thing I have not found in him -- a love of Nature. Some of his biographers think he had no such love. He traveled

by sea and land, among great mountain passes in Cilicia, through the mountains of Macedonia, and over the Balkan hills, over the blue Mediterranean, and among the lovely isles of Greece. But never once does he in any of his Epistles mention the wonders of Nature, the splendor of sky or sea, or the glory and majesty of mountains, the beauty of flowers, or the flight of birds, except in his discussion of the resurrection of the body that springs from the sown seed, and the difference in the glory of one star from another. 'There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory.' The fact that there is such glory he admits, but there is nothing to indicate that he was ravished by that glory. Still, we have no right to say that he was not. He was writing Epistles to his Converts and the churches upon infinitely important ethical and spiritual subjects, and there was no occasion for him to enter into rapturous description and comments upon the wonders and beauty of nature. But in my forty years of intimate communion with him I have never once been inspired by him to look for the blinding glories of the passing days and seasons, or the pop and splendor of star-lit nights.

But not so when I turn to Job, to the Psalms of David, the Proverbs and Songs of Solomon, and the sweet talks and parables of Jesus. There we see the sparrows feeding from the Heavenly Father's hand, the ravens and the young lions and every creeping thing looking to Him for daily food, the fox fleeing from enemies to his hole, the conies among the rocks, the wild goat among mountain crags, the nesting bird, the busy ant, the swarming bees, the neighing war-horse, the spouting whale, the bridal lilies, the rose of Sharon, green and smiling meadows, still waters, ice, snow, and hoar frost, the glowing fire, tempestuous wind and billowing seas, the lowering sky of the morning threatening rain and storm, the red sky of the evening presaging fair and smiling weather. 'The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament showeth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.' The vast deeps of the heavens are the tabernacle of the sun, 'which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race,' and the race-course compasses the whole circle of Heaven, and the whole creation in one vast antiphonal choral harmony praises God. So David sings.

But the suggestions, and beauty, and wonder, and mysticism in nature to which Paul has never turned me, but to which Jesus, and Job, and David, and Solomon pointed me, I am now finding in large measure in my tiny back-yard.

In the deep, dark, underground crowded railway of New York, roaring along beneath the great city and plunging beneath the broad and lordly Hudson River, late at night after attending Meetings and lecturing Cadets, early one January, I became chilled and waked up in the middle of the night to find my head and throat inflamed with a heavy cold. I spent two days and a half in bed under the doctor's care, and then crawled out and went to Chicago, where a four days' whirlwind campaign awaited me. The Territorial Commander, all his staff at T.H.Q., and all Officers of all departments in the great city and Division, and a host of Cadets and Soldiers, welcomed me, and for four days I gave myself without stint to the Meetings. Once, for the first time I could remember, I feared my chest would fail me, as I gasped for breath while speaking to the Cadets. Oh, those Meetings! They were times of Heaven upon earth. At the last session with the Cadets, which continued from 3 to 7 p.m., the whole place seemed lit up by the reflected glory on their young faces.

At last, weary and happy, I boarded a train late at night for Texas. The temperature outside was zero, the snow was knee deep, and there was no heat in our car. I sat and shivered in my sweater, winter overcoat, and a big cape, and finally went to bed with my clothes on, still to shiver. When we got to Texas I was aching in all my bones. For three weeks I fought on, and then the 'flu' claimed me, and for the next three

weeks I was in bed, and for the next few weeks among pine woods trying to get back my strength.

Presently I came home, but could not walk the length of a city block without panting and gasping for a long breath. My doctor examined me, and then sat down silent and stern, looked at me, and then lectured me: 'You have gone to the edge of the abyss. Stop now or you will stop with a crash from which you will find it hard, if not impossible, to recover. If you take my advice, you will stop for six months.' He had warned me at other times, but I had not always listened to him, had laughed at him, and gone my own way, but somehow I felt he was right this time, and I would fail to heed him at a dread risk.

The Commander was informed, and she graciously granted me all the time needed to rest and recuperate. The General heard about it and wrote me: 'After so many years of toil, you no doubt need a pause.' He further advised me to go to the wilderness, away from the roaring city and the crushing crowds, and yield myself to the things peculiar to the wilderness for a complete change, and suggested the Rocky Mountains.

What a joy that would be, if Mrs. Brengle were only here to go with me. But go alone, among strangers, not well, weak and listless, unfit to walk, unable to climb -- that was different.

A further exhaustive physical examination revealed an impoverished state of my blood, not pernicious, but sufficiently grave for the doctors to say that I must keep in the sunshine and open air, live largely on green vegetables, and rest.

For nearly thirty years, by day and night, summer and winter, through long hours I had labored for souls, sung and prayed and preached in crowded, steaming, ill-ventilated Halls, pleading with souls and dealing with penitents in an atmosphere so depleted of oxygen and poisoned that every pore of my body, every lung cell and red blood corpuscle cried out for fresh air, and now I have turned to my back-yard to get what I need. It has been waiting for me for ten years. I saw no beauty in it that I desired it. But it holds no grudge, and welcomes me now and never hints at my lack of appreciation and my past neglect.

A clump of yellow and blue iris is in one corner, a flowering shrub that has never bloomed for eight years and may be cast out as an unprofitable cumberer of the ground, is at one side, a rambler rose bush, now preparing to burst into a blaze of pink flame, and a crab-apple tree, which I believe botanists say is a relative of the rose, occupy the center of the yard, and a few square yards of green grass sprawl around iris and shrub and tree.

Just outside the border of my back-yard on one side is a big oak tree, and on another side a maple tree, and they cast cool shadows over the grass when the sun is hottest. Some distance away are a few other oak trees. One belongs to a robin and some English sparrows. Another belongs to two young grey squirrels, who have bound themselves together by matrimonial ties and only yesterday built a nest for their prospective family in the fork of their tree out of leaves and twigs which they cut with their sharp teeth from tips of the far-reaching branches.

Yesterday one of them slyly visited the tree which belongs to the robin and sparrows. He watched cautiously and climbed quickly. There were some nests up there he hoped to find defenseless. But a sparrow's keen eyes spied him, and she sent out a far-reaching S.O.S., and from every quarter sparrows came, and then a robin. The entente was perfect. And then I heard fierce, shrill war cries and witnessed an aerial battle as thrilling after its kind as any fought over the forts and forests and fields of France. I laughed at the mischievous cunning and daring of the little robber, but I confess my sympathies were all

with the allied forces. They chattered and screamed, and dashed upon him with sharp beaks and rending little claws; they came from above and all sides, swift and sure, until he turned ignominiously and fled to escape with whole ears and unimpaired eyes. The little grey rascal! It was wilderness epic.

The trees are glorious. They are not so large as their forefathers, but I think of them as the heirs of all the ages, and as I look at their broad-reaching limbs and into their deep-green foliage, they suggest the dark, solemn, whispering, primeval forest that once clothed this continent with its sheen like a great green ocean. Right here the red Indian, the bear, the deer, the skulking panther roamed only twice as long ago as the lifetime of men now living.

Swift and speeding automobiles, and loud, rumbling trucks rush past my back-yard, and I hear thundering trains and factory whistles not far away, but here in this wee enclosure, partly in fact and partly in imagination, I am living a wilderness life. An ocean of fresh air, fifty miles deep, laves me in its waves that beat upon all the shores and isles of seas, and the mountains and plains of all continents; and sunshine beams ninety million miles long unerringly find me with their life-giving rays.

I would like to tell you about the ants, and the big, fierce horse flies, and the little flowers among the grass, so tiny and so shy as scarcely to be seen, which I have discovered in my back-yard. The grass, to the little creatures who live among its spires and tangled masses, is a forest as vast and mysterious as the great forests that have disappeared before the ruthless onslaughts and march of man. They live and hunt their prey, and make love, and bring forth their young, and flee their enemies, and live their short little lives among the green aisles and shadows of the grass, and know nothing of the greater world that arches above them, with its strifes and loves and labor, and aspiration, and sin and shame and redemption.

The astronomer tells us that, so far as they can judge, there are many sidereal universes. The heaven of heavens is full of them. But if that is so, if there are many universes of the infinitely great in the vast abysses of space, then I am sure there are many universes of the infinitely little in my backyard, as dear to God as those composed of flaming stars; and if health and strength can be found in the wilderness of plain or forest, or on mountain or sea, I believe it can be found among the teeming wonders, the mystic universes, and in the ocean of air and sunshine I find in my back-yard.

O Lord, I worship amid the wonders of Thy creation, and give Thee thanks for a contented mind and the wealthy heritage of my little back yard. Amen.

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