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Catherine Kleier

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Natura Revelata The importance of nature in the Jesuit University

*Reflections on
Environmental Biology,
the Liberal Arts, and Laudato Si'*

By Catherine Kleier

The observation and study of nature can be a useful pathway for engaging spirituality and understanding habits of the scholarly mind. These habits of attention to nature mirror the critical thinking skills so fundamental to the liberal arts. In “Laudato Si’,” Pope Francis asks us to privilege the Earth the way we privilege the poor. Developing a relationship with nature will help us all live out the pope’s call. The revelation that nature provides can give our lives meaning and help us to live more deeply in our own habitats.

In an *America* article in 2000 entitled, “How to Be Catholic in a Jesuit Context,” Howard Gray, S.J., asked, “Is there an ecumenical process that is both deeply religious but genuinely acceptable to those of other beliefs or no formally religious belief?” Then he outlines a Jesuit approach that first involves focus and then attention, reverence, and devotion. Finding spiritual union implies that we must look inward, but I propose that an outward focus on nature can also bring spiritual revelation. *Natura Revelata*, or nature revealed, can be the ecumenical process to bring us to union.

This process of focus, attention, reverence, and devotion is very much the pathway the liberal arts exalt within the disciplines. Teaching this process not only helps students in Jesuit universities to embrace union but may also help to model an approach to the life of the mind that we wish to inspire in our students. The Latin verb *revelare* means: to unveil, uncover, lay bare; disclose, reveal. Although the word *revel* may not be the same root, the added meaning of revel, or celebration, is equally appropriate to *Natura Revelata*. Thinking about nature in this way, we can also see a similarity to the process that all scholars engage on their path to truths in their disciplines.

In science, observations elucidate nature’s patterns. In order to observe at all, though, one must focus, which is the first part of Father Gray’s suggestion. Focusing our attention requires discipline, but like anything that requires work, there is usually a payoff. With focus and observation comes the recognition of a pattern. Such a recognition is a “eureka moment,” or a revelation. For scientists, this movement towards

the eureka moment may be a slow, plodding march, but usually that slog is followed by a frenzied flow of thought and understanding. I find nature a useful pathway for my students because it requires so little background knowledge. It's a good thing too that nature can be approachable without formal knowledge, because few people know anything about the natural history of where they live. Modern science views natural history as archaic and many universities don't even teach natural history any more.

To illustrate my point about the paucity of natural history knowledge, consider if you can answer the following: What phase is the moon in tonight? What constellations are visible in tonight's night sky? Name five native birds that are resident year round. Name five native non-tree plants in your home. Name five insects native to your home.

Natural history in our immediate physical place is the gateway to *Natura Revelata*. Understanding and observing local plants and animals can lead to the formation of patterns in the mind, which can be revelations and eureka moments, not just in science but also in faith and in emotional and physical aspects of life. Nature is no less a wonder for the nonbeliever as for the believer, and the moments and discernments nature provides are

available to everyone. To study nature, to understand nature or anything in the world, one can rely upon intuition, and one can also focus one's attention to make observation.

Sometimes students will ask me how I knew what I wanted to study. If we are introspective enough, we will understand that we didn't actually choose. More often, the subject matter chooses us. Like the eureka moment, there is a slow advance in observation, then some research, reading, experimentation, until there is some understanding. Possibly, even answers are revealed, and this is thrilling. Before we have realized it, we are in love. Like falling in love with a person, this is not the sort of thing that happens overnight, but if you study anything with enough perseverance, it reveals its mystery, and you begin to revel in your love. Nature provides an easy gateway to observation and study because it is tangible and all around us.

I believe the study and love of nature has not been explicit in the Jesuit university. To be sure, "finding God in all things" certainly echoes an implication of God in nature. Yet, focusing intentionally on nature provides a way of living that is indicative of "How ought we to live?" Nature forces us to think outside of ourselves. There is much documentation that

Composting, Food Waste, and Trust the Tap

By Isabella Kaser and
Jake Gilchrest Dudley

As active members of the Sustainability Committee at Regis, we create programs that implement sustainability practices. This academic year we have worked with our cafeteria vender to decrease the amount of food waste. For a week during lunch, committee members stood at the dish rack and asked people to clear their plate into a bucket, placed on a scale so they



saw how much waste they contributed. By the end of the week the amount of waste decreased from 120 to 80 pounds.

Our committee also initiated two composting, work-study positions, because having students lead composting efforts is the most effec-

tive strategy. Approved by the administration, student employees work with local businesses and Bon Appetit (on campus) to compost.

Sustainability is also integrated into our Integrative Core classes. In one class entitled "Modeling Sustainability," students created the

nature soothes our minds and relieves our stress. Emerson and Thoreau wrote about a returning to nature to gain access to the human spirit. Nature, though, is not apart from us. Nature is intrinsically part of the human being. To observe this nature though and celebrate it as God's creation or simply as a pathway to the life of the mind is *Natura Revelata*.

What might *Natura Revelata* look like in our liberal arts courses? If we look at any discipline, surely we are creative enough to see how nature, particularly one's immediate place-based natural history, can relate to everything. Many writers have touched upon the link between natural history and cultural history, providing a connection to the fields of history, politics, and sociology. Studies also reflect that nature relieves stress and provides feelings of happiness, which can be connected to psychology and economics, which has recently been engaged in happiness studies. Nature provides many ways of viewing mathematics: fibonacci series and the constructal law of nature are but two examples. Certainly, art is influenced by local habitat, and music might be as well, though this is less defined. Nature writing and nature poetry form the genre of ecocriticism, and philosophical writings about our relationship with and our responsibility to nature

are abundant. Thus, no matter our disciplinary silo, could we not involve our students in the stories of plants and animals on some small level to instill *Natura Revelata*?

I believe that we could coax place-based, local, nature knowledge into our courses, and that by doing so, strengthen our university identity as an institution rooted to this place and branching up to a global level. This message of creating a relationship with nature as a connection to God and a connection to humanity forms an antidote to what Pope Francis calls "the rapidification of life" and our "throwaway culture." Place-based, local, nature knowledge will inspire *Natura Revelata* and help our students fortify their relationship with God or simply fortify their relationship with the world and add meaning to their lives.

Catherine Kleier, an associate professor, is chair of the department of biology at Regis University, Denver.

Photograph of a raindrop, page 7, by Chris Kalinko, Seattle University.



"Trust the Tap" project to increase the number of water bottles reused on campus by having refill stations installed around campus.

The committee also educated the Regis community about conservation, food justice, E-waste, and other aspects of sustainability during "Earth Week."

The highly passionate committee has effectively motivated the student body and Regis community towards sustainable living and consumption.

Isabella Kaser and Jake Gilchrest Dudley are both members of the class of 2016, Regis University.



Far left: Maggie Lacy and Erin Mecaller in front of Sustainability Committee information.

Above left: Colleen Lopp adds her food waste to the scale.

Above: Grace Corrigan reviews the food waste challenge information.