Go Ask the ANTS: *Using Nature to Teach Moral*

Modern society increasingly isolates us from nature. We live, work, and play in climate-controlled buildings. Few people grow their own food or depend on animals for transportation or work. Because agriculture has no significant role in our daily lives, we have little reason to learn about how plants and animals function, either as organisms or in their respective environments, nor do we have a pressing need to understand their care.

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Furthermore, our digital toys exacerbate our alienation from nature. We regularly lapse into Nextel narcosis and Blackberry blackout, or float along in iPod-land, oblivious to our surroundings. Our disconnection from nature makes it difficult to comply with the oft-quoted admonition of Solomon to "go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise" (Proverbs 6:6, KJV). In this text, Solomon uses the ant to illustrate diligence, along with planning and preparation for the future. This adage illustrates the didactic use of nature as a tool for moral and spiritual education.

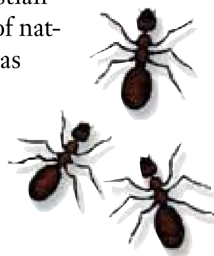
Ellen White also advocates the educational use of nature, declaring, "we are not merely to tell children about these creatures of God. The animals themselves are to be His teachers. The ants teach lessons of patient industry, of perseverance in surmounting obstacles, of providence for the future."[1] Likewise, Christ exhorted us to "consider" the birds of the air, the ravens, the sparrow, and the lilies (Matthew 6:26, 28; 10:27, 29-31). To implement these exhortations, however, one must know what ants, ravens, sparrows, and lilies are and how they live, function, and interrelate with the world around them.

In this article, we will explore three ways to use nature as a tool for moral development. First, I shall set forth a biblical paradigm for a broader approach to nature, then show how using this paradigm can inculcate three important moral virtues; and finally, offer some practical examples.

BY STEPHEN BAUER

A Biblical Paradigm for Approaching Nature

Before trying to use nature as a tool for moral instruction, we need to discover a suitable paradigm through which to view and approach the natural world. Evangelical scholar Norman Geisler describes three possible paradigms—materialist, pantheist, and Christian.[2] According to Geisler, a Christian approach to nature views humans not as exploiters of natural resources, but as stewards over the Earth who, as God's servants, care for it and nurture it.



What does it mean to be a steward of creation? Stewardship is the formal structuring of a *relationship* between an owner and manager that defines the duties of and claims on each party. Such an arrangement can be seen in the Creation story, where God gave humankind dominion over the Earth (Genesis 1:26-28). However, this dominion was not without restrictions—humans were not free to exploit and pillage the Earth without regard to anything other than personal self-interest. Instead, they were commanded to serve and protect the garden.[3] Adam and Eve were thus called to serve and protect things that had lesser power and value than themselves, not for the utilitarian benefits they could gain, but as an expression of love exercised in the image of their Creator.

Paul describes how Christ emptied Himself to take the form and func-

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tion of a servant in order to save humanity (Philippians 2:5-7). Through the incarnation, Christ demonstrated that self-denying service is a foundational principle of God's character. Thus, because the Creator selflessly sustains sparrows—creatures of less value than humans (Matthew 10:31)—so we, as beings made in His image, must adopt a similar orientation. This selfless behavior should embrace not just the natural world, but also our fellow human beings.

In the Edenic paradigm, the first moral virtue that nature teaches is unselfish service and restraint in our relationship with those things over which we can exercise power. Was this ideal negated by the entrance of sin, or is it still valid?

First Moral Virtue: Unselfish Service to Lesser Entities

The myriad effects of sin make it more difficult to use nature as a tool for moral education. Although God's creation was good, the Fall introduced evil into the natural world. How are we to know which things in nature should be emulated and advocated? As Ellen White notes, "even the child, as he comes in contact with nature, will see cause for perplexity. He cannot but recognize the working of antagonistic forces. It is here that nature needs an interpreter."[4] Scripture is that interpreter.

The Edenic stewardship paradigm continued to apply even after the Fall. This can be seen in several of the regulations that God gave to Israel. For example, when attacking their enemies, Israel was not to cut down food trees (fruit and nut) to build siege works (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). Thus, even in war, God's people were commanded to exercise self-restraint so as not to cause undue suffering to humans and animals near the war zone by destroying their food supply. Additionally, farmers were to allow the land to rest every seventh year instead of trying to extract maximum profits from it (Leviticus 25:3-7). Likewise, maximum profit and production were to be sacrificed to permit the ox to eat some of the grain it threshed (Deuteronomy 25:4). These laws restricted human hubris and greed, showing that God calls humankind to practice self-denial and restraint for the greater good.[5]

What does this have to do with nature and moral education? Simply this: Children who abuse animals often go on to abuse their fellow human beings. The paradigm that shapes children's reaction to the natural world over which they exercise *some* power influences how they later treat their fellow humans over whom they have more power, including the unborn, the elderly, and those with serious handicaps (both mental and physical). Training students to use their personal power as Jesus did—to serve and bless instead of exploit and destroy—helps develop this foundational virtue of God's kingdom in both teacher and student, joining them as fellow learners.

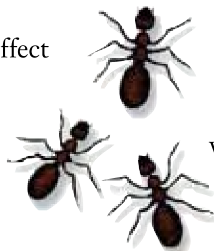
Developing Big-Picture Thinking

A second virtue developed through the study of nature is

big-picture thinking. The ability to trace cause and effect over broad expanses of ideas and time is a skill sorely lacking in Western culture. This is especially notable in children whose attention spans have been programmed to be very short through exposure to media and entertainment.

Ecology offers a vital tool in teaching big-picture thinking and consequential reasoning. How does destroying rain forests in South America affect the climate in Africa? What do deer and dragonflies have to do with each other? How does destroying one predator in a particular environment skew the balance of nature in that ecosystem?

Such discussions can be directed to an explicitly moral application. What long-term consequences result from choices made in middle school and high school—such as those related to dating, sexual behavior, drugs, and entertainment? How might students' behavior now affect the lives of their children and grandchildren? Such exercises can be useful to get students thinking about chains of spiritual consequences that affect time and eternity. Big-picture thinking skills can be honed through the study of the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and nature.



design means our actions always impact others. Hence, we should cultivate intentional, unselfish service so we become part of God's plan. We fit best into His design when we unselfishly serve those around us. From these examples we can deduce a moral lesson about how our actions affect others, even unintentionally, and that God did not design us to live a self-centered life unmindful of others. These lessons will be even more effective if you take your students out into nature to observe these lessons firsthand.

Some Ideas for Curriculum Application

Developing a stewardship paradigm for nature, and identifying the moral virtues that it can teach, will do little good unless we also develop practical ways of including it in the curricula. How, then, can we actually use nature for moral instruction about real-life situations? The methods used will depend on the grade level and the maturity of the students, but here are some generic ideas that may stimulate creative approaches at the K-12 level.

First, illustrating specific character traits from nature is fairly easy to do. Ellen White showed how to do this with ants and other natural phenomena. "The ants teach lessons of patient industry, of perseverance in surmounting obstacles, of providence for the future. And the birds are teachers of the sweet lesson of trust. Our heavenly Father provides for them; but they must gather the food, they must build their nests and rear their young. Every moment they are exposed to enemies that seek to destroy them. Yet how cheerily they go about their work! how full of joy are their little songs!"[6] There are a number of other sources, as well, that can launch the teacher in this endeavor.[7]

Unselfish service can be demonstrated by how, for example, squirrels unwittingly plant new trees when they bury nuts, thus helping maintain a constant food supply for themselves, other animals, and humans. The trees and other food-source plants could not grow unless creatures such as ants and worms tunneled the soil, thus aerating it. The activities of ants and squirrels not only benefit themselves but also the environment. Although these creatures do not purposefully set out to benefit the environment, they are a part of God's plan for the world—that nothing should live solely to benefit itself. Nature's implementation of God's other-centered design has moral implications for humans, who are able to reason and choose. God's

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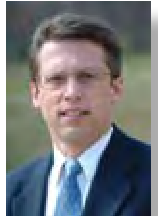
One way to encourage moral virtue would be to organize projects that highlight and affirm the kingdom-value of unselfish, self-emptying love and service. Students can participate in a conservation project, pick up litter, or engage in recycling. Even during a school outing, you can focus their attention on little things like following the trail instead of using shortcuts, to prevent erosion and packing down of the soil in the forest. Additionally, as you teach students about biology, ecology, and other natural sciences, discuss how stewardship of nature applies to each topic. Students can also be assigned to research an unpopular animal, such as a snake or a skunk, and then report to the class on the beneficial role it plays in the local ecology. Encourage students not to cause unnecessary suffering or destruction to plants or animals, especially for their own convenience or pleasure.

Growing a class vegetable garden, in which each student is responsible for a small plot, is an excellent tool for moral instruction and character development. The battle with weeds is a fitting symbol of our struggle with sinful tendencies and bad habits. Moral education can be enhanced by making test plots and removing one required item, such as water or fertilizer, then documenting and discussing the results. This can illustrate the need for purposeful action to maintain spiritual life and moral character—not unlike abiding in the vine as Christ taught.

with your students and colleagues, the possibilities are nearly endless.

In all these pursuits, however, make sure students see adults practicing the paradigms they teach. They must observe true stewardship and grace at work in their teachers to learn how to practice it themselves. We cannot rightly relate to nature, nor can we effectively teach it unless we have given our hearts to Jesus Christ. As we grow in knowledge and understanding, we will be able to use nature as a highly effective tool for teaching moral virtues. ✐



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A final benefit of gardening is that it also teaches the blessing of useful work. Eric Hoffer aptly observed that "nothing so bolsters our self-confidence and reconciles us with ourselves as the continuous ability to create; *to see things grow and develop under our hand*, day in and day out."[8] This latter point could be reinforced by scheduling a dinner that features the harvest of the students' labor.

One problem with gardening is that in many climates, the growing season does not occur during the academic year. In such circumstances, consider using potted plants, partnering with a nearby greenhouse, or erecting a small semi-hydroponic greenhouse on the school grounds. At my uncle's school, the students grew tomato plants, and eventually sold fresh tomatoes to fund additional activities.[9] Student creativity was unleashed as they thought of new experiments to conduct while watching things grow and develop under their hands.

Other possibilities abound. Beekeeping has excellent potential, but is not an option for all. Try solar energy experiments, a feeding station for birds, a schoolyard habitat, or a butterfly garden (see articles on pages 22 and 26.) Once you start brainstorming

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 117.

2. Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989), pp. 293-310. This is chapter 16, focusing on ethics and ecology. These three approaches to nature are given in the context of discussing varying moral approaches to environmentalism.

3. In Genesis 2:15 (KJV), the Hebrew words for "dress" and "keep" are, respectively, *abad* and *shamar*. A survey of *abad* in the Old Testament shows it has strong connotations of the service rendered by a servant or slave to or for a superior. In fact, the substantive form is translated as "slave" or "servant." *Shamar* likewise carries strong connotations of protection, watching over, and being careful to obey.

4. White, *Education*, p. 101.

5. Theologically, this moral characteristic is heavily emphasized in 1 Corinthians 7-13. Self-sacrificial love is the "better way," superior to seeking advantage for oneself (1 Corinthians 12:31 and all of chapter 13).

6. White, *Education*, p. 117.

7. A few sources for ideas to illustrate specific character traits from nature include: Ellen G. White, *Education*, chapters 10-12; *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1941), especially up to around page 125; Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, Inc., *Character Sketches: From the Pages of Scripture Illustrated in the World of Nature*, three volumes (Oak Brook, Il.: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, Inc., 1976). The organization has changed its name to Institute in Basic Life Principles, and their Website, http://store.iblp.org/products/C123/ has more information on the *Character Sketches* series.

8. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Time, Inc., 1963; originally published by New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 35. The book is organized in aphoristic sections, and this quote is from section 30. Italics supplied.

9. My cousin described the project to me in a recent e-mail: "The greenhouse was built at the Baldwin Park Seventh-day Adventist Elementary School around the 1976 - 1977 school year. . . . It was [about] 100 feet long and 12 feet wide, with a path down the middle for access. Each growing side was nearly 5 feet wide x 100 feet. It was sectioned off and given to students to care for. Planting times were varied to spread out harvest times. All that said, from the beginning of harvest to the end (mid summer that first year), 10-15 pounds of large ripe tomatoes were available daily" (Theodore E. Bauer to Stephen Bauer, January 29, 2007).