**John Muir**

“How infinitely superior to our physical senses are those of the mind. The spiritual eye sees not only the rivers of water but of air. It sees the crystals of the rock in rapid sympathetic motion, giving enthusiastic obedience to the sun’s rays, then sinking back to rest in the night. The whole world is in motion to the center. So also sounds. We hear only woodpeckers and squirrels and the rush of turbulent streams. But imagination gives us the sweet music of tiniest insect wings, enables us to hear all round the world, the vibration of every needle, the waving of every bole and branch, the sound of stars in circulation like particles in the blood. The Sierra canyons are full of avalanche debris – we hear them boom again for we read past sounds from present conditions. Again we hear the earthquake rock falls. Imagination is usually regarded as a synonym for the unreal. Yet is true imagination healthful and real, no less likely to mislead than the coarser senses. Indeed, the power of imagination makes us infinite.”

(Muir, 1938, pp. 43-44)

Though John Muir grew up in a conservative Calvinist family, it was not in the bible that he found religion. He was greatly influenced by his geological and botanical studies at the University of Wisconsin. His most significant inspirations came from the ideologies surrounding Deism, Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Building on the works of authors such as Emerson and Thoreau, Muir redefined their principles as his own. In the passage above, taken from a journal he kept during an 1875 trip in which he explored the sequoia belt near Yosemite, Muir makes a poignant statement. His eloquence in describing his submersion in the forest as an experience beyond the five senses is an intriguing introduction to the mind of a man who would become an outspoken voice for preservation and a political force to be reckoned with.

Though his initial inspiration came from his predecessors, he shared little of their ambivalence. His embrace of nature was wholehearted and he described the minutia of detail with a fascination and reverence of a true believer. Muir also applied his knowledge of science to his wilderness quests, turning observation into empirical data and recording his discoveries for posterity. That he was an adventurer, there is no doubt. He ventured thousands of miles in search of new experiences, new vistas of wide-open, untouched spaces. So resonant was the message he shared, so powerful his exposition that it would grow to influence thousands of Americans and to lead to the creation of Yosemite National Park.

Muir described the wilderness as God’s greatest cathedral, worth and requiring all action taken to ensure its protection. He worshiped and called others to worship, as they breathed the cool mountain air. He was the leading proponent in a valiant attempt to save Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley. That the preservationists were defeated and his impassioned pleas were left unheard, were perhaps the greatest disappointments of John Muir’s life. His soul was entwined with nature and he mourned the loss of the Valley with the same depth as he would a great friend. It is his diligence and the sincerity of his message that continues to inspire preservationists today. He is not only the voice of a generation. He is the quintessential champion of the wilderness.

References

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