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PREFACE

Throughout my childhood, my father worked as a manager in the Michigan State Parks system. We moved every three or four years to a different park within Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Even as a young child, I remember spending long days and evenings outdoors—in the woods, on the beach, in the yard. Many of these memories include my siblings and neighborhood friends. But many are the times I spent alone at various “secret” places I had found, places I often escaped to in order to think deep-child thoughts—to communicate with God.

Although I hesitate to compare my experiences with those of a saint, St. Thérèse the Little Flower, describes similar experiences in *The Story of a Soul*: “I preferred to go *alone* and sit down on the grass bedecked with flowers, and then my thoughts became very profound indeed! Without knowing what it was to meditate, my soul was absorbed in real prayer” (SOS 37). St. Thérèse talks often of how she was inspired to love, praise, and understand the God that the book of nature opened to her.

As a Discalced Carmelite Secular, my life is focused on union with God. Like St. Augustine (yes, another saint comparison!), I searched for many years for God, in various places and circumstances. However, in my Carmelite journey of faith, I have discovered that God can be found within. He resides in our very souls—nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Yet, in my adult searching, I have found —just as in my childhood—that I often commune best with Him in natural environments. I feel His presence in the beauty and holy silence of nature. Surrounded by creation, my mind frees, my soul fills with gratitude, and my heart connects with our loving Creator.

Preface

Here too we are in good company with the saints. Both St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, Carmelite Doctors, often used the natural world as a conduit to God:

- † “It helped me also to look at fields, or water, or flowers. In these things I found a remembrance of the creator. I mean that they awakened and recollected me and served as a book and reminded me of my ingratitude and sins” (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Life* 9.5).
- † “Beholding in creation a trace of the divine beauty, power, and loving wisdom, John could not easily resist the enchantment of nature. . . . He would take the friars out to the mountains . . . so that each might pass the day alone there ‘in solitary prayer’” (*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* 26).

Many are the quotations we could cite from saints, popes, theologians, the Catechism, and Scripture that support an appreciation of the natural world as an important dimension of our relationship with God. However, we also need an awareness of the errors of the “New Age” movement, the theological problems with “nature worship”, the heresy of pantheism, and an understanding that God does not depend upon creation for His identity to direct our path. If you are concerned or curious about these issues, please review the Appendix of this book.

In this series, we embark upon a study of nature and God in nature by reading aloud one poem per day, spending time daily outdoors, and, like St. Thérèse, thinking about God. I believe that the beauty, the rhythm, the flow, and the openness of poetry lends itself particularly useful as we journey closer to God with our beloved children and grandchildren in union with what Pope Francis calls “the joyful mystery of God” in creation. May God bless you!

16 July, 2019, Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

A FEW EXPLANATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this poetical study of nature through the seasons is two-fold:

- 1) To seek and experience God personally and intimately by daily exposure to His creative work in nature
- 2) To better appreciate the connection between all of God's creation, its meaning and value, and its role—and ours—in the harmonious praise of God

Briefly, each creation of God has its own value and significance as well as a unique nature that is dependent on the rest of creation. Each creature works to complete and serve the rest of creation. (See CCC ¶340.) All of creation's natures, working together as a system of natures, are what we call "nature"—which "can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all" (*Laudato Si'* ¶76). The purpose of all of God's creation—including us—is to give Him praise and glory: ". . . so that we might exist for the praise of his glory . . ." (Ephesians 1:12).

Our study of God's creation through poetry and outdoor exploration is intended to allow children—and their adult companions—to experience God in a different way, to see Him in a new light, and to deepen our relationship and appreciation for Him and all of His creation—to learn to pray and praise God continuously. This is not a new way of experiencing God. Check out the Psalms and other books of the Bible. Refer to the writings of St. Thomas

A Few Explanations and Suggestions

Aquinas and many other saints. Peruse the teachings of our last three popes—St. Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. Read through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which clearly states: “There is a solidarity among all creatures arising from the fact that all have the same Creator and are all ordered to his glory . . .” (344). (For a more thorough treatment of seeking God through nature in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church, please see the Appendix of this book.)

Hopefully, through the gentle art of poetry and a daily commitment to experience God’s creation outdoors, our relationship with God will become more awestruck as it becomes filled with the wonder, love, and appreciation of His divine wisdom and loving providence. God is more than willing to meet us whenever we reach out to Him. A little bit of openness and availability on our part will go a long way toward helping us fulfill our mission to praise God’s glory in all our being. Let us begin today.

HOW THIS STUDY IS ORGANIZED

ASTRONOMICAL VS. METEOROLOGICAL SEASONS

Astronomical seasons are based on where the sun is in relation to the Earth, with the equinoxes (March and September) marking the dates where the day-to-night ratio is exactly twelve hours each. Because the Earth does not take exactly 365 days to travel around the sun, these dates vary but are generally considered to be March 21 and September 22 with the solstices usually falling on June 21 and December 22—the days with the longest and shortest periods of daylight. So the first day of each season according to the astronomical calendar would correspond to the varying dates of the spring and fall equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices.

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The meteorological calendar for seasons uses the more general three-month chunk of time that is most closely associated with that season's weather. This calendar has the following seasonal dates:

- Winter: December 1 to February 28 or 29
- Spring: March 1 to May 31
- Summer: June 1 to August 31, and
- Autumn: September 1 to November 30

As the meteorological seasonal calendar corresponds more closely with our liturgical year, which begins in the season of Advent around December 1, (and breaks the months of each season more cleanly), this poetical study of the seasons uses the meteorological calendar to track the seasons.

(Please note that much of the material in this study is geared toward the weather and activities common to the temperate climates. My personal experience is almost exclusively that of the upper Midwest of the United States. Adaptation may be necessary depending on your location.)

LITURGICAL VS. NATURAL YEAR

Traditionally, we Americans often begin new projects and make new resolutions at the beginning of our Gregorian calendar year on January 1. Our Church's Roman Rite liturgical new year always begins on the first Sunday of Advent. This date is determined by when the Sunday closest to the Feast of St. Andrew (November 30) falls. The earliest this date can be is November 27, and the latest possible date is December 3. The beginning of the winter season of this series would roughly correspond with the beginning of the Church's liturgical new year.

The other major season of the liturgical year is the season of Lent, which is generally associated with the natural

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season of spring. As the timing of this season depends on the moveable feast day of Easter, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, may be as early as February 4 or as late as March 10, with the date of Easter itself ranging from March 22 to April 25. Therefore, the Lenten season is covered in this study in both the winter and spring seasons.

WHEN AND HOW TO START

There is no “right” starting place for this series—no “correct” season to begin this poetical study of God’s creation. Many may wish to start with the Church’s new liturgical year in December—the winter season. However, feel free to start with the season that best suits your own calendar and availability. Perhaps summer, when school is in recess and life is more laid back, is a better fit for your schedule. Quite possibly, autumn—the beginning of the school year—appeals to you as the best time to start. Maybe you want to examine the optional theme for each season and choose to begin according to which theme seems most interesting to you and your family.

Whenever you begin, remember the program’s two main rules:

1. Read one poem daily *aloud* and have a short discussion on it. (Suggestions for age-appropriate questions can be found below.)
2. Spend at least thirty minutes each and every day outdoors, exploring God’s beautiful creative work. This includes you as well as the children. Always keep in mind that the best way to get children outdoors is to go with them. Trust me; you will be enriched beyond your expectations. Do not hesitate to assume the role of nature mentor to help

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your children or grandchildren increase their love of nature and deepen their experience of God. Review the section on nature mentoring if you need the reassurance that no prior experience or knowledge is necessary. You—yes, you—can do this!

THE DAILY ROUTINE

THE POEMS – DAILY AND SUPPLEMENTAL

For each day of the year, a poem (or several shorter poems) is presented for reading. The poem may be about an aspect of nature for that season, relate to the seasonal theme, or to a specific activity common for that season. Read each poem aloud. Perhaps each child could also read the poem aloud. Read slowly and with feeling. Don't hesitate to re-read the poem several times. If a child takes a special liking to a poem, help the child to memorize it. Having three or four favorite poems in a memory bank provides a store of great pleasure that will bubble up and spill out on days when our love of nature overwhelms us and we have no other way to express our joy in that special experience. It is a great treasure.

In addition to the daily poems, several other poems are available in the supplemental poetry section following the daily poems. These poems focus on the liturgical year or specific national holidays. They may be chosen to read aloud instead of, or in addition to, the poem for each day. There is a poem available for each day of Christmas, each day of Lent, and at least one poem for each significant holiday or Catholic holy day. Additionally, there are poems for meditation upon the themes for the First Friday and First Saturday devotions. Use the supplemental poems as you deem best for your family—either replacing the daily poem, read in addition to the

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daily poem, or not read at all. If you wish to incorporate them into the daily routine, it may require some preparation time to preview these poems to determine which ones best suit your family and purposes. Be sure to discuss these poems with the children/grandchildren just as you would the daily poems.

As you and your family begin to read more and more poetry, be sure to note favorite poets. Go online and check out more poems by these favorites or perhaps purchase as a gift an entire volume written by them. Pay attention to the type of poetry (rhythm and rhyme scheme) that appeals to each child. Encourage them to take a favorite poem, study how it is written, and use it as a pattern for writing an original poem of their own. Perhaps after reading a poem, they may decide that they could write a better poem on that topic. The world needs poetry and poets; coax the young poets around you to produce poetry that they enjoy writing and sharing. Model writing poetry by generating poems of your own.

DISCUSSION

To encourage discussion, always ask open-ended questions that require more than a yes/no answer. For younger children, the following questions offer a good beginning but remember that not all questions will apply to every poem. As you gain confidence, feel free to construct your own questions geared toward the ages and interests of your own children/grandchildren.

1. What is this poem about?
2. How does this poem make you feel?
3. What action do you want to take because of this poem?
4. What did you learn from this poem?
5. What does this poem suggest about God?

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A different approach is to ask each child to retell the poem in their own words, starting with the youngest child and having each child add something to the retelling. (Educator Charlotte Mason calls this technique “narration.”)

For older children (and adults), try using the following three principles/realities/values that stem from the teachings of Thomas Berry, Catholic eco-theologian and author of several books including *The Dream of the Earth* and *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. According to Thomas Berry, these three characteristics govern the universe and reveal what the universe has to teach us. (These questions are also appropriate to ask as a nature mentor when outside exploring nature with children.)

1. Uniqueness (Each creation offers a unique expression of the divine, an authenticity that illustrates how the divine image dwells within.)
 - How is this creation different from all others? What makes it unique?
 - How does it reveal the divine?
2. Interior Identity
 - What is the job or specific task of this creation?
 - How does it function?
 - How does it give harmonious praise to God?
3. Communion/Connection
 - What is the relationship between this creation and the rest of creation?
 - How does it serve or provide for the rest of creation?
 - How is it connected to or dependent upon the rest of creation?

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THE QUOTATIONS

The quotations beneath the daily poems are included for the adults participating in this study. Often, as we feed our children the knowledge and inspiration they crave and need, our own needs may go unfulfilled. These short selections are intended to inspire you, deepen your understanding about an idea or topic, or add a touch of humor.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This section first includes appropriate picture books for children. In preparation for this section, hundreds of possibly worthy picture books were read and examined; many of these books were discarded in favor of the exceptional books chosen for each season. The books marked “Stellar” would be considered “must reads” for each season. The remaining books have been categorized according to the holidays and optional themes for each season. The intention is that these books would be read aloud by either an adult or child.

Depending on the interests of your children/grandchildren, you may wish to focus on one particular theme or perhaps choose several books from each category. (It would be hard to read them all!) As you read through these books, be sure to note the author of those books you particularly enjoy. Watch for other books by these authors listed in this series, and/or check them out at your local library.

After the final section of picture books, there is a short section on other nature books for children. This section varies with the season and is outlined below.

Winter: Nature Non-fiction Books for Children

Spring: A Short List of Children’s Nature Authors

A Few Explanations and Suggestions

Summer: A Short List of Children’s Nature Poets, Collectable Children’s Poetry Books, and A Few Children’s Poetry Anthologies

Fall: A Short List of Children’s Nature Chapter Books

The last part of this section contains recommended adult books that fall loosely in the following categories:

- The “Why” of Nature
- Connection with Nature
- Nature Activity Books—Outdoor Adventuring
- Nature Journaling
- Nature Crafts and Drawing Books
- Nature Books for Grandparents
- The Practice of *Shinrin-yoku*: Forest Therapy or Forest Bathing
- The Practice of Mindfulness

OUTSIDE ACTIVITY

The crux and primary purpose of this poetry series is to explore nature and to seek God in His beautiful creation. If you are unsure about what to do outside, check out the “Additional Resources” section described above for ideas. Assume your role as nature mentor as described on pages 17-21 below.

By spending unfettered time in nature, we will unleash our sense of wonder and come to better understand God. By increasing our familiarity with different aspects of nature, we will begin to see the connection between all creation and discover the loving concern God has for us all.

Please make the effort to get your family (including yourself!) outside for least thirty minutes each day—an hour would not be too much! Get outside, play, experience creation, and live in the present moment. Be sure to pause occasionally in holy silence to give thanks, glory, and praise to our awesome Creator!

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OPTIONAL SEASONAL THEMES

For those interested in a more guided study of nature, each season has a theme of recommended focus. These themes provide a hub around which outside activity for each season can be centered as well as an emphasis on specific knowledge and experience of God's created world.

Do not get obsessive with the suggested resources below. Choose only those best suited to your particular situation. Be flexible. Taylor these suggestions to your own circumstances and time allowances.

WINTER THEME: Reflecting on the Mystery of God through Natural Prayer

- **DEFINITION OF NATURAL PRAYER:** Finding intimacy with God by experiencing Him in the beauty of nature; prayer experienced amidst creation (Beware, however, of the caution expressed by St. John of the Cross in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.24.4: If the heart and soul are not elevated to God, an experience of sensory delight may merely be another form of recreation.)
- **GOAL:** Mystic—someone who seeks union with God through prayer and self-surrender
- **SUMMARY:** The season of winter—when much of nature is at rest and we anticipate and contemplate the Mystery of God in the Christ Child—is a great time to reconnect with that wonder for God that natural experiences (a beautiful sunset, a snowy-topped mountain, a perfect snowflake) so easily enkindle. Enjoy the stillness of winter while practicing the virtue of holy silence—quiet walks in the snow, a pause to listen to the winter

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birds. Take your daily prayer time (rosary or meditation) outside. “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence . . .” (St. Teresa of Calcutta).

- **ADULT RESOURCES**

- Natural Prayer: Encountering God in Nature*
by Wayne Simsic
- The Secret Life of John Paul II* by Lino Zani
- When the Trees Say Nothing* by Thomas Merton

- **CHILDREN’S RESOURCES**

- A Quiet Place* by Douglas Wood
- Crinkleroot’s Book of Animal Tracking* by Jim Arnosky
- The Other Way to Listen* by Byrd Baylor
- The Wild Weather Book* by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield
- WoodsWalk* by Henry W. Art and Michael W. Robbins

SPRING THEME: Detecting God in Nature through Phenology

- **DEFINITION OF PHENOLOGY:** Nature’s calendar; nature’s clock; the study of the timing of seasonal biological activities including first flowers, leaf budding, bird migration, etc. (We can also include *seasonality*, which is the study of changes in the physical environment such as first frost, date the ice melts, etc.)
- **GOAL:** Nature Detective—someone who carefully observes the wonders and mystery of nature

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- **SUMMARY:** Spend spring observing firsts and lasts in nature: first robin, first eruptions of various plants and flowers, first sound of the frog voices, last frost, last ice on the lake. Mark these dates on a regular or perpetual calendar—an excellent beginning toward keeping a more complete nature journal. Allow the children free rein to explore and take notes and photos of various aspects of God's creation. "Nature is a constant source of wonder and awe" (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si' 85*).
- **ADULT RESOURCES**
 - ❑ Daily readings from any of the following: *Hal Borland's Book of Days* (New England), *A Walk through the Year* by Edwin Way Teale (New England), or *Wit & Wisdom of the Great Outdoors* by Larry Wilber (upper Midwest)
 - ❑ Or weekly readings from *The Beginning Naturalist* by Gale Lawrence or shorter articles for each month in *A Seasonal Guide to the Natural Year* by John Bates (upper Midwest), or *Minnesota Phenology* by Larry Weber
 - ❑ Or browse through any calendar/almanac suited to your location.
 - ❑ Check into joining a citizen science program of interest.
- **CHILDREN'S RESOURCES**
 - ❑ *Crinkleroot's Nature Almanac* by Jim Arnosky
 - ❑ *One Day in the Woods* by Jean Craighead George
 - ❑ *This World of Wonder* by Hal Borland
 - ❑ *When I Consider* by Marian M. Schoolland

A Few Explanations and Suggestions

SUMMER THEME: Inspecting God's Glorious Creation through Naming Nature (Nomenclature)

- **DEFINITION OF NOMENCLATURE:** A system of names in a given field such as botany or biology
- **GOAL:** Naturalist—someone who is an expert or student in the study of plants, animals, and the natural world
- **SUMMARY:** By taking an interest in nature and being willing to make the acquaintance of the most common natural elements in your locale—by learning the names of the most common birds, flowers, and trees—we can become more acquainted with all that surrounds us in God's great outdoors. Names foster familiarity, and lead to a sense of connection. “What I know of the divine sciences and the Holy Scriptures, I have learned in woods and fields. I have no other masters than the beeches and the oaks” (St. Bernard of Clairvaux).
- **ADULT RESOURCES**
 - ❑ *Beyond Your Doorstep* by Hal Borland
 - ❑ *Circle of the Seasons* by Edwin Way Teale
 - ❑ *Exploring Nature with Your Child* by Dorothy Edwards Shuttlesworth
 - ❑ *Great Lakes Nature* by Mary Blocksma
 - ❑ *Handbook of Nature Study* by Anna Botsford Comstock [a classic since 1939]
 - ❑ *The Naturalist's Notebook* by Nathaniel T. Wheelwright and Bernd Heinrich
- **CHILDREN'S RESOURCES**
 - ❑ Regional field guides (the more specific to your area the better) to birds, flowers, insects, trees, or any other area of interest

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- ❧ *Nature Anatomy* by Julia Rothman
- ❧ Any of the *True Books* (*True Book of Insects*, etc.) published by Children's Press in the 1950's and 1960's
- ❧ Any of Jim Arnosky's *Crinkleroot's Guide to Knowing* books (*Birds*, *Trees*, etc.)
- ❧ *Crinkleroot's Guide to Walking in Wild Places*

AUTUMN THEME: Respecting God's Creation through Care of the Natural World

- **GOAL:** Eco-Catholic
- **DEFINITION OF ECO-CATHOLIC:** Someone who values not only Catholic spirituality and doctrine but also the natural world, the environment, and justice
- **SUMMARY:** In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis encourages "every person living on this planet" to take better care of our common home, Earth. Like his three predecessors, he emphasizes the need to care for and understand the connection between all of God's creation. Review carefully your family's relationship with the natural world and the habits that support the environment and those that are detrimental. "Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good" (Pope St. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 40).
- **ADULT RESOURCES**
 - ❧ *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard: Over 100 Things Christian Families Can Do to Help the Earth (A Seasonal Guide)* by Loren & Mary Ruth Wilkinson

A Few Explanations and Suggestions

- ❑ *Earthsongs: Praying with Nature* by Wayne Simsic
- ❑ *In Defense of Nature* by Benjamin Wiker
- ❑ *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis
- ❑ *Life from Our Land* by Marcus Grodi
- ❑ *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes toward a Green Thomism* by Christopher J. Thompson

- **CHILDREN'S RESOURCES**

- ❑ *Celebrate the Earth: Psalm 104* by Dorrie Papademetriou
 - ❑ *Crinkleroot's Guide to Giving Back to Nature* by Jim Arnosky
 - ❑ *Song of Francis* by Tomie dePaola
 - ❑ Read and implement actions proposed by Pope Francis in ¶211 of *Laudato Si'*.
-

Note that these suggested themes are *optional*. If the children are young, or if the themes seem intimidating to implement, feel free to skip them. Perhaps you would like to utilize the picture books as your only use of the optional season themes. Or maybe you would like to study the suggested adult resources for your own enrichment without adding the children's resources.

Be kind to yourself. We're going for joy here—not added stress! Do not put pressure to use every resource and/or theme. Attach no guilt to customizing and simplifying. The main objective is to enjoy God's creation and to connect with the Creator—not to cram in every possible teaching moment. Allow the children to ask and find answers to their own spontaneous questions in an adventure of discovery at their own lead. Relax and enjoy!

“FOR FROM THE GREATNESS
AND THE BEAUTY OF CREATED THINGS
THEIR ORIGINAL AUTHOR,
BY ANALOGY,
IS SEEN.”

WISDOM 13:5

YOU CAN BECOME A NATURE MENTOR (ALMOST WITHOUT TRYING)

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder . . . he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in” (Rachel Carson in *A Sense of Wonder*). This “one adult” becomes this child’s nature mentor. It is not a difficult task. It does not require vast knowledge. According to Rachel Carson, it is based upon “having fun together rather than teaching.” Whether you are a grandparent, a parent, a teacher, the neighbor down the street, or an aunt like Rachel Carson, you need no advance preparation other than asking yourself, “Am I up for adventure?” “Can I handle being a co-conspirator?”

The best nature mentors are not those who have the answers but who can stimulate the questions, who can step aside and let the child take charge. Effective nature mentors are those who are fellow adventurers, willing to let their own sense of wonder come alive, and share their feelings about nature—and reverence for nature—rather than merely providing explanations and facts. Observe and explore. Be aware and listen—not only to the wonders around you but to those sharing the experience with you. Be respectful to the child’s interests and enthusiasms. Be attentive to the present moment—the activity and the feelings that are evoked.

Ask questions. Point out interesting sights, sounds, animals, and plants. Bring home specimens to talk about, learn about, and display. Include God in the discussion.

Help them to observe the activity around them. Allow them to directly experience the wonder that surrounds them —saving the “teaching moment” for a later recap of the

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event. Encourage them to see, hear, smell, and touch. Allow them not only to run and enjoy but also to sit in holy silence and observe—watch the grass bending in the wind, hear the babble of nearby water and birds, smell the flowers and the bark of the trees, touch the moss and slippery rocks—pondering and raising the heart to God. The love of nature is best inspired by experiencing nature—even quiet observation can be an interactive encounter on an emotional level.

Be enthusiastic and joyful in all their discoveries. Play games; join in their fun. Often, the memory of an experience is associated with the emotions related to that experience. By making time with nature joy-filled, joy will come to be an emotion associated with nature itself.

Sharing the natural world with others adds to the richness of the encounter—not only at the moment but later in discussion. Take time each day to reflect together on time spent in nature, reviewing individual discoveries and emotions. In this way, everyone benefits from each person's experience and insights, and our own encounters become more meaningful. Additionally, a bit of nature bonding and affirmation occurs that binds us with each other, and more deeply with the created world.

As a nature mentor, basic knowledge may be helpful but, in this case, only a little knowledge of nature is not a dangerous thing—or even detrimental. Enjoyment of simple natural aspects (the colors of the sunset, the blowing clouds, the calls of birds, the vastness of the night sky, the feel of rain on your face) will serve to enkindle more joy and wonder than many interesting facts. “I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel” (Rachel Carson).

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It is more helpful to arouse their curiosity and sense of wonder than to pepper them with facts and names they may or may not be able to assimilate. As a nature mentor, receptivity and awareness trump personal resources. Is it less wondrous to gaze at the night sky even if you do not know the name of a single star or constellation?

Encourage exploration using the senses of smell and hearing. This is particularly effective at night and in rainy weather. The smell of the ocean, frog ponds, and rain-filled forests can provide lasting memories. The night sound of insects, frogs, flight of birds overhead, thunder, and wind are especially powerful. Try to focus not only on the full chorus of sound but also on each of the individual contributors. Seek where they are hiding.

Unfortunately, it is easy to become immune to the wonder of God's creation—to become insensitive to repeated exposure to God's great gifts. Rachel Carson would have us ask, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?" Like the reception of Holy Communion, when we take for granted that we can receive It often, we often receive It less (and less reverently). The same holds true of God's gifts within the natural world. Because we can see it all the time, we often see (and enjoy its benefits) less often. When is the last time you took the time to explore the night sky? Or pause your busy agenda to enjoy the glorious sunset? Or listen attentively for even a minute or two to the morning chorus of birds? Learn to tune in to God not only in church, but also in His cathedral of the natural world.

RESOURCES

So what resources are required to be an effective nature mentor? For starters, you may want to read one or more

You Can Become a Nature Mentor

of the books that most directly influenced the above insights and ideas:

- ❑ *The Sense of Wonder* by Rachel Carson (1956)
- ❑ *Sharing Nature with Children: The Classic Parents' and Teachers' Nature Awareness Guidebook* by Joseph Cornell (1979—a newer edition is available)
- ❑ *How to Raise a Wild Child: The Art and Science of Falling in Love with Nature* by Scott D. Sampson (2015)

Spending a few dollars on a good magnifying glass or hands lens will pay off handsomely. With this, a snowflake or grain of sand takes on far greater wonder as does a drop of pond water or the moon at night. You may wish to throw down another couple of dollars on child-sized flashlights—or ultraviolet flashlights!—for night exploration of insects, rocks, and flowers. (Bedtime can wait!)

As far as expensive equipment and toys, do not let your heart be troubled. In 2012, *Wired* magazine published an article entitled “The 5 Best Toys of All Time.” Here is your shopping list:

1. Stick
2. Box
3. String
4. Cardboard Tube
5. Dirt

If you must spend money, a few good field guides may be helpful—the more regional the better—for identification of common trees, birds, flowers, and insects. Keep in mind, however, this caution from Rachel Carson: “I

You Can Become a Nature Mentor

think the value of the game of identification depends on how you play it. If it becomes an end in itself, I count it of little use. It is possible to compile extensive lists of creatures seen and identified without ever once having caught a breath-taking glimpse of the wonder of life. If a child asked me a question that suggested even a faint awareness of the mystery behind the arrival of a migrant sandpiper on the beach of an August morning, I would be far more pleased than by the mere fact that he knew it was a sandpiper and not a plover.”

A pair of puddle boots, some old clothes, and raingear (purchased or makeshift) will allow your child to explore without fear of “getting dirty.” Be sure to provide the same for yourself.

Nature mentoring really is as simple as accompanying kids outside and letting them do what comes naturally. Let them be the boss. If you are doubtful, try at least a half-hour outside every day for a month—put it on your calendar. While Scott Sampson in *How to Raise a Wild Child* claims, “The best place to fall in love with nature is wherever you happen to be,” be sure to vary the setting occasionally. Find a place where you (as well as the children) are excited to be. See what effect this daily thirty-minute habit has—on you and the kids!

Rachel Carson had one wish for every child: “. . . a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.” It is in wonder that we often find God.

“...HE FIXED THE ORDERED SEASONS
AND THE BOUNDARIES OF
THEIR REGIONS,
SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT SEEK GOD,
EVEN PERHAPS GROPE FOR HIM
AND FIND HIM,
THOUGH INDEED HE IS NOT FAR
FROM ANY ONE OF US.”

ACTS 17:26-27

DECEMBER

THE QUEEN OF THE YEAR

Edna Dean Proctor (1829-1923), published in
Poems, 1890

WHEN suns are low, and nights are long,
And winds bring wild alarms,
Through the darkness comes the queen of the year
In all her peerless charms,—
December, fair and holly-crowned,
With the Christ-child in her arms.

The maiden months are a stately train—
Veiled in the spotless snow,
Or decked with the bloom of Paradise
What time the roses blow,
Or wreathed with the vine and the yellow wheat
When the noons of harvest glow.

But O the joy of the rolling year,
The queen with peerless charms,
Is she who comes through the waning light
To keep the world from harms,—
December, fair and holly-crowned,
With the Christ-child in her arms.

**“AND MARY KEPT ALL THESE THINGS,
REFLECTING ON THEM IN HER HEART. “**
LUKE 2:19

December 1

His MOTHER'S INVITATION

S. Marr, published in "Ave Maria" magazine,
December 4, 1909

When Advent shadows seem to bring
The feast of Christmas near,
We should our Blessed Mother's voice
In loving accents hear.

It is as if our gentle Queen
Invited every one
To gather at the Bethlehem Crib
In honor of her Son.

She asks us all for Christmas Day,
Reminding us to bring
A little gift to mark the feast,
The birthday of the King.

And so we have the Advent weeks
That we may ready be
To bring unto the Crib our gifts
For Mary's Son to see.

His Mother says the gift that will
The greatest joy impart,
In honor of the birthday feast,
Is just a loving heart.

So let us get them ready now,
That, when the carols ring,
We all may have a birthday gift
In honor of the King.

"No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us." – 1 John 4:12

December 2

THE STAR

Jane Taylor (1783-1824), published in
Rhymes for the Nursery, 1824

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.

When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.

Then the trav'ller in the dark,
Thanks you for your tiny spark,
He could not see which way to go,
If you did not twinkle so.

In the dark blue sky you keep,
And often through my curtains peep,
For you never shut your eye
Till the sun is in the sky.

As your bright and tiny spark,
Lights the trav'ller in the dark,
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

"If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how men would believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the City of God which has been shown."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

December 3

A LESSON FROM THE SNOWFLAKES

Sister Mary Josita Belger (1899-1978), published in
Sing a Song of Holy Things, 1945

The grass and flowers have gone to sleep
In warm, dark earthy beds.
And now God sends His snowflakes down
To cover up their heads.

The little starry snowflakes
Come flying, flying down
And make a soft white blanket
Over all the town.

My soul will be that lovely
If I keep it pure and bright,
Always following my angel,
Always trying to do right.

"Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
arrives the snow." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

December 4

OUTSIDE THE DOOR

Annette Wynne (died 1953), published in
For Days and Days, 1919

Outside the door the bare tree stands,
And catches snowflakes in its hands,
And holds them well and holds them high,
Until a puffing wind comes by.



"'The folk wisdom about the forest being more than just a collection of trees is, indeed, a first working principle of ecology.'" – Christopher J Thompson, *In Defense of Nature, quoting Odum and Barrett*

December 5

THE ALL ALONE TREE

F. O'Neill Gallagher, published in *Everychild*, 1921

There's a tree that is growing alone on the hill,
By the path that winds up at the back of the mill,
And we're awfully fond of it, Maudie and me,
And we call it the All Alone, All Alone Tree.

It is old, and it's wrinkled and twisted and dry
And it grows by itself with no other tree nigh,
And we always sit under it, Maudie and me,
Because it's the All Alone, All Alone Tree.

In the bright summer-time when they're cutting
the hay,
Then the birds come and sing in its branches all
day
And we're awfully glad of this Maudie and me,
Because it's the All Alone, All Alone Tree.

But in the dark winter the birds have all flown,
And we know that it's standing there, quite, quite
alone,
So we creep out and kiss it then, Maudie and me,
Because it's the All Alone, All Alone Tree.

"Trees are much like human beings and enjoy each
other's company. Only a few love to be alone."
John Muir

December 6
St. Nicholas

THE LEGEND OF ST. NICHOLAS

Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), published in *Bits of Talk, in Verse and Prose, for Young Folks*, 1892

... **H**urrah for good St. Nicholas!

The friend of all the poor,
Who never sent a little child
Unsuccored* from his door.

We do not pray to saints today,
But still we hold them dear,
And the stories of their holy lives
Are stories good to hear.

They are a sort of parable,
And if we ponder well,
We shall not find it hard to read
The lesson which they tell.

We do not pray to saints today,
Yet who knows but they hear
Our mention of them, and are glad
We hold their memory dear?

Hurrah for good St. Nicholas,
The friend of all the poor,
Who never sent a little child
Unsuccored from his door.

* Unaided; with no help

"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners,
but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and
members of the household of God, built upon the
foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ
Jesus himself as the capstone." – Ephesians 2:19-20

December 7

THE FIRST SNOWFALL (FROM)

James Russell Lowell (1819-1891), published in
Heath Readers: Fourth Reader, 1903

The snow had begun in the gloaming,
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.
Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine too dear for an earl,
And the poorest twig on the elm tree
Was ridged inch deep with pearl. . . .
I stood and watched by the window
The noiseless work of the sky,
And the sudden flurries of snow-birds,
Like brown leaves whirling by.
Up spoke our own little Mabel,
Saying, "Father, who makes it snow?"
And I told of the good All-father
Who cares for us here below. . . .

"Silence is the great unknown power source, the great untapped resource. Silence is more than noise, not less." – Peter Kreeft

December 8

TO MARY IMMACULATE
Sister Maryanna, O.P., published in
A Lovely Gate Set Wide, 1946

Patroness of our loved land,
Maiden Mother pure,
Guard thine own America
From all harm secure.
Radiant with sanctity,
Be thyself our light.
Guide our nation's destinies,
Thou wilt lead aright.
By thy mystic crown of stars,
By thy mantle's hue,
Keep our starry banner high,
Help us to be true.
Let thy smile rest tenderly
On our country's youth.
School their hearts in honor, faith,
Purity, and truth.
Thou by God's foreshadowing
Kept from sin-stain free,
Pray for us who have recourse,
Virgin, fair, to thee!

"Silence is the great unknown power source, the great untapped resource. Silence is more than noise, not less." – Peter Kreeft