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“Now ask the beasts to teach you, the birds of the air to tell you.”

Job 12:7

An Active Learning Introduction to Contemplative Prayer in the Natural World
THL 105 Introduction to Theology



Learning Outcomes

1. Articulate the implication of what human beings are and who is God.
2. Explain the practice of prayer.
3. Appropriately employ theological resources and methods in theological thinking.
4. Demonstrate Catholic and Franciscan literacy
5. Appropriate faith reflexively and respectfully

Overlooking the natural landscape of the Ecolab, the quiet space offers refuge from the bustle and stress of campus life. With inspiration from St Francis and Job 12:7—“Now ask the beasts to teach you, the birds of the air to tell you”—students put themselves in position to practice a form of prayer known as contemplation as they attend to the divine voice manifest in creation all around.

Contemplation is a receptive or passive process, one that God initiates in us. “We cannot choose to contemplate, though we can dispose ourselves to it by practicing what St John of the Cross calls ‘mental prayer.’” –Thomas Joseph White, OP, *The Light of Christ: An Introduction to Catholicism*. Students prepare for our learning exercise by reading “When God was a Bird,” in Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray, Jr., *Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology*. In class, we spend a few moments reflecting on the idea of general revelation, representations of God in nature from Scripture, and the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Then we process to the St. Francis Colonnade, where students are invited to find a place to sit, close their eyes, and immerse themselves in the sounds, smells, textures, and ambiance of the colonnade and ecolab below. After a few quiet moments, I encourage students to focus on a single sensory experience—perhaps some nearby birdsong, the prickle of cool wind against the cheek—and to listen for the divine voice. When students write about the experience afterward, I’m often surprised by some of the ways that the activity moves people. Here are a few excerpts:

I enjoyed this because it was different from our everyday lecture-style classroom environment. This was also helpful to me personally because I did not come from a religious home or background so taking a step back while discussing things that pertain to the religion were helpful in many ways. I’ve always believed in God and been thankful for Him. But standing outside with my eyes closed for just a few minutes, listening to, and feeling all of God’s creations was almost astonishing and hard to believe in many ways. The teachings of church and God have always been harder for me to wrap my head around because I was never entirely taught the religion until I started attending Marian University. None of my family is religious and I just feel as if I haven’t been exposed quite enough to understand the true meanings and beliefs. But by standing and just appreciating, I felt as if the animals and the nature were almost speaking to me. In Job 12:7-8, it states “But ask the animals, the will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.” By conducting this experiment, I feel as if I fully relate to that statement. Watching the birds fly free, and hearing the leaves crinkling and the laughter of those around me, really made me realize this is what it’s all about. On top of the scripture and the teachings, there is a lot more to the religion and God than what you would normally think about on a day to day basis. The birds flying over and seeing over everything is a symbol of God and the people around me are His creation.

I tried to listen to every single bird noise and be thankful for each of them, and I would try to sing with them. As the birds sang a song that feels like it was orchestrated specifically for me, I found myself stress free. I was no longer worried about the imminent stress on my back and for a few moments, a weight was lifted. This moment gave me enough energy to push through the day, and tomorrow it may get me through the week and maybe the semester. I recommend listening to God in nature for everyone. Get that stress off your mind, be one with nature for 10 minutes, it will make 24 hours feel easier.

I had my own spiritual experience recently when I sat outside on Wednesday. Wednesday was almost 70 degrees outside, I sat under a tree so that I could enjoy the sun and be cool at the same time. I felt so much peace within me when I sat in silence while enjoying God’s creation. I witnessed God among the trees, the sun that beamed on my feet, and even the small subtle breeze that would come from time to time. Gods presence is fully around us but humans are too busy to see his presence. We are distracted by jobs, obligations, money, and social life that we don’t stop and take the time to be present. If we do stop to witness natures beauty we will see him all around us.

Today, during the last twenty minutes of class, we went outside of the Norman Center and walked all the way to the edge that is above the EcoLab. We used this time to reflect and relax. Professor Noble walked us through the whole thing. He made us sit down in some stone benches, facing the EcoLab (and the nature of course), told us to close our eyes, and to be aware of our surroundings. By paying close attention to our senses, now slightly more heightened once our sight was gone, we could feel the sun in our skin and the wind blowing in our faces. We could also hear some birds chirping, water rushing, and some leaves rustling (and of course, the sound of that one truck). It was a very relaxing experience. . . . After a couple minutes, professor Noble told us to open our eyes and turn back to face him. We talked about what we experienced, and what it meant for us. I wouldn’t really consider this as speaking out in mystical oneness in nature, but it sure got very close to a “conversation” with nature. It was hard to concentrate on nature completely due to the sounds of the city so nearby but it was sure nice to stop for a minute and take a break from school and our daily routine.

As I was sitting on my front porch preparing to conduct this experiment about oneness with nature, something fascinating happened. I was expecting to observe an animal as part of my experiment, however, a huge thunderstorm rolled in over my house. So instead of looking from the perspective of one of God’s creatures, I decided to look from the perspective of one of God’s natural events. As I sat with my eyes closed listening to the rain, the thunder and eventually the hail I imagined God speaking. The rain was God saying that he was cleansing not only nature but also each of his creations. Just like the act of baptism, the rain was a symbol of cleaning away sins. The thunder was God’s stern voice saying that he is always with us and he will protect us and that no matter we should not turn away from him. The hail that eventually came beating down around was God showing how amazing his power is, how he can take a perfectly warm spring day and suddenly turn it cold enough to produce balls of ice. Observing this storm made me reflect on the wonder of God. I was reminded that despite how much I think I can control things, in reality God is in control. Despite how difficult it is we all need to trust God will see us through the storm.

During this meditation in silence, I listened to the creatures and observed the several animals passing through the woods. Before this exercise, I seemed to not realize the amount of beauty that surrounds me every day. I took nature for granted and all the happiness and joy being outside brings me. I randomly connected with a bird passing from tree to tree. The creature was majestic and free. The animal seemed to be careless and at peace with the world. I believe I connected to the bird due to my mind remembering the significance of Jesus in the form of a dove. With this message in my thoughts, I felt as though I had become one with nature. I began to notice the gifts that God has provided me with. God has blessed humans with a beautiful climate to continue to help individuals reconnect with Him. Every tree, creature, blade of grass, and several other organisms are a reminder that God is always with us, living within the earth and our souls.

