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Creaturely Pedagogy Part Two: What's in a Name? Theology and Taxonomy

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In an address at the 1968 International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), Senegalese forester Baba Dioum famously declared, “In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”[i] We cannot understand what we do not notice, and we will not notice what we cannot name. To love and learn we must first know, and to know, we must name.

In my more conventional courses, I continue to assess students on theological and philosophical terms and names. I do so not to determine students’ comprehension and competency in a master discourse, but instead for the sake of calling them to account, to attention, to care, for the uses of variegated, precise language. Because the world is dynamic and changing, and since I hold that God calls human creatures to growth in self-transcendence, we must take seriously the task of stewarding our thoughts and speech.

Concepts, ideas, and words, labels, classifications, and names all have dates. Each has a history. But language use is not merely a matter of historical interest, it is a profoundly serious moral task. Through naming, or taxonomy, we learn to navigate the worlds of meaning we have received.[ii] The work of learning, and even creating, new names can be a profoundly liberative, even salvific, activity. But naming can also be used to instrumentalize, enslave, and

degrade places, creatures, and persons.

Consider the moral difference between labeling fungi, plants, and animals “natural resources,” on the one hand, and “living organisms” on the other. The former risks instrumentalizing such lives economically; the latter might instead help us to recognize their intrinsic value. A third approach might recognize such lives not as resources, or as living things, but instead as “creatures” called into existence, loved, and sustained by God.

Whether one uses the language of “natural resources,” “living organisms,” or “creatures,” all three are morally preferable to operating with a mental bestiary or botanical consciousness that ascribes worth, or wrath, to creatures from a narrowly anthropocentric perspective. “Pests” and “weeds” play major roles in our collective cultural psyche, but our distain for such living things does not make them any less loved by God.[iii]

In Creaturely Theology we share in the divine work of knowing and caring for other creatures through noticing and naming the lives, even those we might initially despise, that surround us. Each student is tasked with identifying at least one hundred different species of plants, animals, and fungi during the semester. That work requires leaning on scientific and naturalist wisdom gathered in field guides and the living community of *iNaturalist* experts to get to know the creatures we happen to meet.[iv]

Such work has lasting, powerful effects. As one student put it, “The class as a whole showed me how to wonder again. We would go into the woods not knowing what we would find, and then see a plant and not know what it was, and then not know much about it even after identifying it!”

We *are* learning so much about the biodiversity of this place, but such knowledge only increases our appreciation of the mysterious otherness of each creature! We never encounter a generic flower or beetle or bird or snake; each chance meeting is with a unique, unrepeatable individual, known intimately by its Creator. To share such knowledge is a holy privilege, and each time we do we become just a little more like the One who has made us all.

Notes & Bibliography

[i] See Barbara K. Rodes and Rice Odell, eds., *A Dictionary of Environmental Quotations* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 33.

[ii] My approach to the related issues of self-transcendence, growth, meaning, and historicity depends upon the work of Bernard Lonergan. See especially Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness,” in *A Third Collection*, edited by Robert M. Doran and John Dadosky (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 161–76.

[iii] For an important exploration of the risks and deleterious effects of such consciousness on

both non-human creatures and on humans, see Bethany Brookshire, *Pests: How Humans Create Animal Villains* (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2022).

[iv] See <https://www.inaturalist.org/>. We also use the apps Seek (https://www.inaturalist.org/pages/seek_app) and Merlin (<https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/>). Both are useful but Seek often exhibits the significant limitations of AI technology, while Merlin more regularly shows its promise.

<https://wabash.center/2025/05/creaturely-pedagogy-part-two-whats-in-a-name-theology-and-taxonomy/>