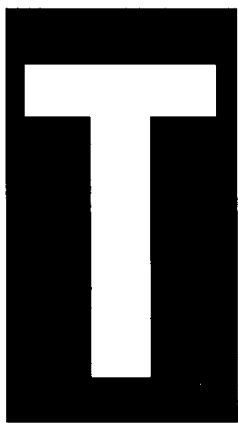


# The Ministry OF NATURE



ist education?

Nature's primary ministry to humanity is its constant reminder that service to others is fundamental. Ellen White says that this was Christ's reason for being: "From His earliest years [Jesus] was possessed of one purpose; He lived to bless others. For this He found resources in

o minister is to serve, and any ministry is a form of service. So how does nature—more specifically for this discussion, the out-of-doors—serve? And why is outdoor ministry important to Seventh-day Advent-

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nature; new ideas of ways and means flashed into His mind as He studied plant life and animal life."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important characteristics of Seventh-day Adventist education is service. Ellen White's well-known definition of true education calls it "the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come."<sup>2</sup> So the expected outcome of true education is ser-

vice. And the out-of-doors provides a natural resource for illustrating and modeling for Christian service.

Jesus used simple stories from the book of nature to teach His deepest spiritual truths. However, even He had to spend time preparing in order to use this method effectively. The Saviour spent years of careful study in both God's written Word and His created Word. As a boy, Jesus studied at His mother's knee, learning about men like Solomon from the written Word. As a young lad, He also learned about the lily and the mustard plant from the created Word. As He came to understand how wonderfully the natural world and the written Word are intertwined, He applied the truths of nature to religious principles. Thus, the lessons learned from the out-of-doors became

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**BY JAMES A. TUCKER**

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flash-points for the Master Teacher as He ministered to humanity.

#### **Natural Selection or Service?**

The idea of service is central to a creationist perspective. In fact, creation as a whole serves as a metaphor for the dichotomy between the natural-selection philosophy of evolution and the fallen-nature philosophy of creationism. Survival of the fittest implies that you get whatever you can by taking—by eliminating your rivals and becoming No. 1.

But the opposite view also can be used to interpret nature—that the universe is a magnificent example of service where

### ***The out-of-doors provides a natural resource for illustrating and modeling for Christian service.***

every element depends upon every other in fundamental and significant ways. In fact, evolutionary biologists are hard-

pressed to explain why creatures exhibit altruistic behavior. Since such giving “can’t be natural,” they have to find some selfish reason for it.

There are, however, many stories of animals helping other creatures in need without any obvious self-benefit. For example, I recently read of a pet-shop owner in South Africa who received a shipment of goldfish, one of which obviously could not swim. It would soon die because without moving through the water, its gills would not process oxygen. The shop owner placed four other fish in the tank with the disabled fish. Three of them ignored the sick fish, but the fourth took

over its care, pushing it around in the tank and thus providing it with life-giving oxygen. At feeding time, the helper fish pushed the disabled fish to the surface where they fed together. At the time I read the report, these two fish had co-existed in the shopkeeper's tank for a year. The similarity between this story and the parable of the Good Samaritan is remarkable. The natural tendency of nature in its fallen state is to ignore the helpless, attack the weak, and compete for available resources. But despite the effects of sin, there are still clear evidences of God's original plan that defy a "selfish" explanation for the origin of species.

We are privileged to teach our students that the gospel is good news about an alternative world view in which selfishness is overcome by divine love. Our God came to Earth in the form of a servant to remind us of the principles of His kingdom, which are based on service. Most of the stories He used illustrate this philosophy.

#### **Motivating Students**

Perhaps the greatest challenge that

teachers and others involved in youth ministry face is motivation—self-motivation and the motivation of the children and youth they serve. The out-of-doors provides the most naturally motivating context available—a hill invites you to climb it; a flower invites you to smell it; a meadow invites you to run across it; a dog invites you to pat it; a blueberry invites you to taste it; a bird's song invites you to listen, and the scenes of nature everywhere invite you to watch for unfolding adventure and further action.

We were created to be active, to enjoy a natural world filled with excitement and adventure. Yet, at an alarming rate, we are becoming passive participants in an artificial world. With nerves jangling and minds spinning, today's youth are running to and fro, frantically seeking a sound foundation for their lives. Where will they find it? Not from the artificial action of a video game or an amusement park! And certainly not from passively sitting in front of a television set watching the action of others!

Children need action, but they want it in a meaningful context—a purpose that

***Children and youth need the freedom of thought that occurs as they freely wander through the green grass or along the seashore.***

fits with their natural needs for safety and security, love, and belonging. They thirst for knowledge and self-realization. Children and youth need the strength of character that comes from climbing in or swinging from trees, or from climbing a mountain. There is a natural permanence about trees and mountains that brings peace of mind and gives strength to the soul when experienced firsthand.

Children and youth need the freedom of thought that occurs as they freely wan-

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## **Children need action, but they want it in a meaningful context—a purpose that fits with their natural needs for safety and security, love, and belonging.**

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der through the green grass or along the seashore. They need, and in fact crave, the serenity that comes from sitting beside a quiet stream or watching the waves roll onto the shore. They need the boldness of purpose inspired by a rushing, roaring mountain stream. They need the realization of trust and dependence that comes from observing a pair of robins feed a brood of nestlings. Our children and youth need the clearness of vision that comes from looking at a natural world under a clear blue sky, breathing crisp,

fresh air. These are the natural outcomes of actively experiencing the natural world.

While we must live in an imperfect world for the time being, we can still experience the values of the Master's guiding hand in countless ways. The whole natural world—God's first book, now marred with sin but still filled with His signature—provides a magnificent context for preparing for life dedicated to service.

On this basis, I have concluded that all of nature is a ministry, complete with textbook, illustrating the power and love

of God in a way that nothing else can. There are numerous ways of applying this ministry—in the home, in the classroom, at camp, in the pulpit, in outdoor clinics, and in our private meetings with the Creator. It is a supreme honor to involve our students with the Creator and Redeemer in the active aspects of the out-of-doors. They will learn as Jesus did from the wonders of nature—both simple and complex—and practice as Jesus did the use of nature as a model for Christian service. ✍

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2. \_\_\_\_\_, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1905), p. 13.