



## The Sacred Depths of Nature

By Ursula Goodenough

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This eloquent volume reconciles the modern scientific understanding of reality with our timeless spiritual yearnings for reverence and continuity. Looking at topics such as evolution, emotions, sexuality, and death, Goodenough writes with rich, uncluttered detail about the workings of nature in general and of living creatures in particular. Her luminous clarity makes it possible for even non-scientists to appreciate that the origins of life and the universe are no less meaningful because of our increasingly scientific understanding of them. At the end of each chapter, Goodenough's spiritual reflections respond to the complexity of nature with vibrant emotional intensity and a sense of reverent wonder.

A beautifully written celebration of molecular biology with meditations on the spiritual and religious meaning that can be found at the heart of science, this volume makes an important contribution to the ongoing dialog between science and religion. This book will engage anyone who was ever mesmerized--or terrified--by the mysteries of existence.

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## The Sacred Depths of Nature By Ursula Goodenough Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

Ursula Goodenough is an internationally recognized cell biologist; she is also an accomplished amateur theologian--an unusual combination of interests in a time when science and religion are widely divided. In *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, she proposes what she calls a "planetary ethic" drawing on the lessons of both science and metaphysics, celebrating some of the mysteries that are central to both: "the mystery of why there is anything at all, rather than nothing," for one, and "the mystery of why the universe seems so strange," for another. Exploring scientifically based narratives about the creation of the universe and the origins of life, Goodenough forges a kind of religious naturalism that will not be unfamiliar to readers of New Age literature--save that her naturalism has the hard-nosed rigor of a laboratory-trained scholar behind it. Goodenough offers a crash course in the life sciences for her readers, encompassing the basics, for instance, of biochemistry in just a few paragraphs (and getting it right in the bargain), touching on Darwinian biology and population dynamics and even chaos theory to make "an epic of evolution" that has all the hallmarks of an origin myth. Faith and reason, in her view, are not mutually exclusive, and her well-written treatise makes a good argument for bridging the gap between the two. --Gregory McNamee

### From Publishers Weekly

In eloquent prose, Goodenough, a noted molecular biologist, offers a scientist's insight into the dialogue between science and religion. The book's structure is similar to the Daily Devotionals found in some Protestant denominations, but with a decidedly broader approach to the vast ontological questions being pursued. Beginning with an autobiographical sketch, Goodenough moves resolutely through the major questions of being. Her inquiries cut across the boundaries of cosmology, astrophysics, cell biology, evolutionary theory, sexuality and death, moving into the realms of philosophy and theology. The author, while no theist, recognizes the eternal human quest for meaning engendered by the essentially non-quantifiable mystery of consciousness. Displaying open-mindedness to non-scientific approaches in her search for ultimate understanding, she writes with equal respect of Taoism's enigmatic, ironical credo and of 19th-century Transcendentalists' humanistic vision. This spiritual diversity, accompanied by scientific observations drawn from such authorities as Stephen Hawking and Edward O. Wilson, makes for a stirring, enlightening read. In part a reverential memoir by a dedicated scientist, this book provides a meeting place for the revelations of advanced science and technology and the universal, unanswerable questions of humanity. 18 line drawings.

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### From Scientific American

Several years ago I took a day off from research on wild dolphins to walk miles of remote Australian beach. To the west, the meeting of sea and sky was barely discernible; to the east, searing desert extended 2,000 miles. For hours I walked through this exquisite but barren landscape in utter silence, mourning a recent personal loss. Suddenly, with no warning, the hollow feeling within merged with the emptiness all around into a singular, stunning void that engulfed me with dizzying speed. I collapsed to the ground, reduced to a tiny, isolated speck in a vast, impersonal universe. I struggled to a sitting position, blinking in the midday glare, searching for something, anything, to bring me back to my ordinary self. Nothing. Despite the sun's heat, I felt cold and I was afraid. Then, as if from a great distance, I heard a faint, familiar sound that brought immense relief. A few hundred yards away a dozen cormorants were gathering at the sea's edge to dry their wet, oily wings, squawking and scrambling as they settled into their places on the sand. I drew closer, hoping fiercely that they wouldn't rise up in flight, and beheld the luminous surface of their dark feathers. Those birds could have been anywhere, but instead by some miracle they were right there, then, with me. I felt

wave upon wave of gratitude for their existence and for the existence of all sentient beings. In *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Ursula Goodenough, one of America's leading cell biologists and a professor of biology at Washington University, gives voice to many such moments of communion with nature. The recognition of nature's power to evoke emotions such as awe and gratitude is, of course, not new, as Goodenough acknowledges in her introduction. Two aspects of her approach, however, are novel. First, Goodenough's "nature" encompasses not just our direct experience of the natural world but also our scientific understanding of it. She argues eloquently that such understanding, far from provoking detachment or despair, can be a wellspring of solace and joy. The second novel aspect is Goodenough's definition of religious experience. For her, experience qualifies as religious if it entails emotions like awe, wonder, gratitude or joy, regardless of whether or not the person associates such emotions with traditional religious creeds, deities or supernatural phenomena. Goodenough, who professes no belief in a god, describes a profoundly religious relationship with the cosmos rooted in her detailed understanding of phenomena such as atoms and stars, the complex workings of a cell, and the astonishing evolutionary emergence of a mind capable of inquiring into its own nature. Such understanding can give rise to what she calls "religious naturalism," a scientifically based reverence for every aspect of the natural world, including ourselves. Goodenough aims to "present an accessible account of our scientific understanding of Nature and then suggest ways that this account can call forth appealing and abiding religious responses." She does this by beginning each chapter with a factual description of a phenomenon critical to life, such as how DNA codes for proteins or how natural selection works, and concluding with a briefer section labeled "Reflections," in which she shares the thoughts and feelings this scientific knowledge stirs in her. I found this format effective. Her separation of the science and the religious emotions gave me the freedom to first absorb the science as fact, without being distracted by her responses. The "Reflections" were unabashedly personal and gently encouraged me to contemplate my own responses. For a book about a new kind of religion, there is a striking absence of preaching. The Scientific and the Sacred Goodenough presents her scientific knowledge as stories, with plot twists and turns that trigger a "what's next?" curiosity. I assigned several chapters of the book to undergraduates with minimal background in biology, and they found them intelligible and informative, so one does not need to know much about science to enjoy this book. For a scientist like myself, Goodenough's elegant narratives provide a refreshing way to encounter familiar material. I was especially impressed with her ability to cut right to the quick, so that within a few short pages the reader is whisked from the big bang to the emergence of our planet and the birth of life on earth. The factual sections of the book are valuable enough to stand on their own as a brief, highly engaging introduction to the epic of evolution. Would that all scientific texts were so carefully conceived and beautifully written. But the "Reflections" are the best and by far the most original part of the book. Goodenough's luminous prose evokes images and feelings more commonly associated with poetry than science, and her meditations on meaning are infused with wonder and joy. She acknowledges, however, that for many people scientific accounts of nature's workings are more likely to evoke alienation than religious awe (see, for example, Melvin Konner's review of Richard Dawkins's *Unweaving the Rainbow* in the March issue of *Scientific American*). In the first set of reflections, she shares her own encounter with nihilistic despair when, as an adolescent, she pondered the night sky. She thought about how each star is dying and the fact that "Our sun too will die, frying the Earth to a crisp during its heat-death, spewing its bits and pieces out into the frigid nothingness of curved spacetime." Such thoughts overwhelmed her: "The night sky was ruined. I would never be able to look at it again.... A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the atom. So I did my best not to think about such things." How she came to terms with such feelings reveals the personal foundations of her religious naturalism: But, since then, I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks in the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don't have to seek a point. In any of it. Instead, I can see it as the locus of Mystery.... Inherently pointless, inherently shrouded in its own absence of category. The clouds passing across the face of the deity in the stained-glass images of Heaven.... The realization that I needn't ... seek answers to the Big Questions has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity

wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanence, the fact of it all. I go all the way out and then I go all the way down, to the fact of photons without mass and gauge bosons that become massless at high temperatures. I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting. Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate. Goodenough's emancipation, through what she calls "a covenant with Mystery," represents her very personal, hard-won experience of the Divine. One prime reason Goodenough's covenant with mystery is so emancipating is that it allows her to revel in, rather than retreat from, the paradoxes she encounters everywhere as both a scientist and a mortal being. Her articulation of one such paradox, in the chapter on "Multicellularity and Death," offers a striking example: ... it is here that we arrive at one of the central ironies of human existence. Which is that our sentient brains are uniquely capable of experiencing deep regret and sorrow and fear at the prospect of our own death, yet it was the invention of death, the invention of the germ/soma dichotomy, that made possible the existence of our brains.... Does death have any meaning? Well, yes, it does. Sex without death gets you single-celled algae and fungi; sex with a mortal soma gets you the rest of the eukaryotic creatures. Death is the price paid to have trees and clams and birds and grasshoppers, and death is the price paid to have human consciousness, to be aware of all that shimmering awareness and all that love. My somatic life is the wondrous gift wrought by my forthcoming death. Goodenough's religious naturalism is inspired by the scientific account of cosmic evolution, a story that has important things to say about the universe, where we came from and our place in the larger scheme of things. This particular story is brand-new in the timescale of human life on earth, but, as Goodenough points out, all people feel compelled to develop accounts of the cosmos that tell them "how things are" and which things matter. Although we refer to such stories as myths, in a prescientific world these accounts did exactly what science does for us today: they provided a conceptual framework within which people could comprehend and relate to a mysterious universe. But myths were not just helpful stories; they also served to sanctify the cosmos and our place in it, thereby eliciting a direct experience of the sacred. An Inherited Awe Perhaps an imperative to experience our world as numinous lurks deep within us all, a legacy of tens of thousands of years of ancestral religious practice. The Sacred Depths of Nature can thus be viewed as an invitation to bring together aspects of experience only recently rendered separate by the rise of modern science--but to bring them together in a new way, based on an account of reality potentially shared by people everywhere. Although the emergence of a universal religion based on a shared scientific worldview seems like a distant dream, Goodenough might be right that this is our best hope for a desperately needed global ethic dedicated to the preservation of life on earth.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ida Resler:**

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children until eventually adult are different content. We all know that that book is very important normally. The book The Sacred Depths of Nature was making you to know about other know-how and of course you can take more information. It is extremely advantages for you. The book The Sacred Depths of Nature is not only giving you considerably more new information but also to get your friend when you experience bored. You can spend your own personal spend time to read your e-book. Try to make relationship while using book The Sacred Depths of Nature. You never experience lose out for everything in case you read some books.

**Beatrice Flanagan:**

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**Teresa Randall:**

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