

# The Creation Spirituality of John Denver

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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*Let this be a voice for the mountains  
Let this be a voice for the river  
Let this be a voice for the forest  
Let this be voice for the flowers  
Let this be a voice for the desert  
Let this be a voice for the ocean  
Let this be a voice for the children  
Let this be a voice for the dreamers  
Let this be a voice of no regret<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction to Creation Spirituality

Perhaps the first thing to understand is that Creation Spirituality has nothing to do with *creationism*, the unsound and unscientific belief that the world was created in six days and is only a few thousand years old. Creation Spirituality, rather, could also be called Cosmic Spirituality because it considers ultimate meaning, and human meaning, through the 13.7-billion-year history of the entire Universe. Although he didn't write it, John Denver expresses this connection in what is perhaps my favorite of the songs he sings, "The Wings that Fly Us Home."

*And the Spirit fills the darkness of the heavens  
It fills the endless yearning of the soul  
It lives within a star too far to dream of  
It lives within each part and is the whole  
It's the fire and the wings that fly us home*

Thus, Creation Spirituality is not anthropocentric, meaning it is not human-focused. It views human existence as only part of a much larger and more ancient story, a story that doesn't begin with, will not end with, and should not center on the emergence of human beings. Creation Spirituality respects the miracle of all life and all existence, and understands as Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God."<sup>2</sup> And I'd add, so is every rock, and every mountain, and every stream and ocean and atom and molecule of existence.

So, Creation Spirituality has a positive view of the world, of life, and of human existence. It does not accept the doctrine of original sin or that the world is fallen, but prefers the first law of creation, "It is good." Or, as John Denver sings,

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<sup>1</sup> From, *Amazon*, *ibid*.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1983p. 35.

*And oh, I love the life within me  
I feel a part of everything I see  
And oh, I love the life around me  
A part of everything is here in me*<sup>3</sup>

The term *Creation Spirituality* was coined by theologian Matthew Fox, the controversial Catholic Priest who was silenced and eventually defrocked after publishing his book, *Original Blessing* in 1983. Contrary to the doctrine of Original Sin, he says, “Original blessing is far more ancient and biblical a doctrine and ought to be the starting point for spirituality.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Original Blessing*, Fox outlines four paths of Creation Spirituality that we’ll explore more fully in a bit, but, in the simplest terms, the Creation Spiritualist is anyone who is inspired by nature, and nobody I can think of was more inspired by nature than John Denver. I often say that Matthew Fox wrote the book on Creation Spirituality, and John Denver wrote its hymnal. When I first realized this some years ago, I didn’t know if John Denver had ever even heard of Creation Spirituality, but after I’d written an essay making the link, Matthew Fox, whose school I attended, sent me an email stating the following:

A historical fact you should know:

I met John on two or three occasions when he sponsored a weeklong symposium in his favorite Aspen Mountains and I was invited to speak at those occasions. He was at all my talks (and I at his concerts there). The last time, he came up and gave me a kiss (really!) and said he would like to study with me sometime. Then he died, I think, about six months later.

So, you’re not the first to connect Denver and CS. He did it himself!

I miss him. He died much too young.

### ***Via Transformativa***

There are four paths or ways associated with Creation Spirituality. The first I’ll mention is what Matthew Fox calls the *via transformativa*, or the transformative way. Quoting Meister Eckhart, who said “compassion means justice,” Fox explains that “... Creation-Centered Spirituality considers that a consciousness of faith needs to include a social, political, economic awareness that is critical and that offers

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<sup>3</sup> John Denver, Dick Kniss, Mike Taylor, Cherry Lane Music Publishing Company, Inc., 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Fox, *ibid.*, p. 49.

workable and creative alternatives.”<sup>5</sup> So, it’s not about self-transformation, but about creating social justice, about transforming the world.

John Denver loved nature, the world, and people, which is clear from so many of his songs, but also through his actions and activism. He was one of the five founders of The Hunger Project, a strategic organization and global movement committed to the sustainable end of world hunger and served on its Board of Directors for a dozen years. President Jimmy Carter asked him to serve on the Presidential Commission on World and Domestic Hunger and President Ronald Reagan presented him with the “World Without Hunger Award.” In 1990 he received the National Wildlife Federation Conservation Achievement Award for founding environmental organizations like *Plant-it 2000*, now *Plant-it 2020*, which has planted over a million indigenous trees since Denver founded it in 1992. He also worked hard to support Save the Children, The Cousteau Society, Friends of the Earth, the Human/Dolphin Foundation and the Windstar Foundation, an educational organization he started in 1976 to help promote holistic approaches to address environmental concerns.

Denver used his music and his popularity as a *via transformative*, as a way of transforming the world. “*When I write a song,*” he once said, “*I want to take the personal experience or observation that inspired it and express it in as universal a way as possible. I’m a global citizen. I’ve created that for myself, and I don’t want to step away from it. I want to work in whatever I do ... towards a world in balance, a world that creates a better quality of life for all people.*”<sup>6</sup>

In 1985, for example, Denver traveled to what is now the former USSR to perform his brand-new song *Let Us Begin*<sup>7</sup> with Alexandre Gradsky, the first Soviet singer and superstar allowed to perform and record with an American artist.<sup>8</sup> The song links the poor peoples of both countries by emphasizing the plight of the American farmer and the suffering of those who died during the siege of Leningrad.

*What are we making weapons for?  
Why keep on feeding the war machine?  
We take it right out of the mouths of our babies  
Take it away from the hands of the poor  
Tell me, what are we making weapons for?*

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<sup>5</sup> Fox, *ibid.*, p.156.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.johndenver.com/philanthropy/phil.html>

<sup>7</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Cherry Mountain Music, DreamWorks Songs, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, Denver, who was also the first western artist allowed to perform a multi-city tour in Mainland China, returned to the USSR in 1987 to do a benefit concert for the victims of Chernobyl.

*Have we forgotten  
All the lives that were given?  
All the vows that were taken?  
Saying never again  
Now for the first time  
This could be the last time  
If peace is our vision  
Let us begin*

*Raven's Child*,<sup>9</sup> written in 1990, may be less familiar to mainstream audiences, but its prophetic cry for justice is no less poignant. It begins by poetically alluding to Raven's child "chasing salvation" whose black beak has "turned white from the crack and the snow... on the streets of despair... a spoonful of mercy can set free the soul." He blames the arrogant drug king who sits "away and above and apart... even children are twisted to serve him, and greed has corrupted what once was a heart." During the next stanza, Raven's child is "keeping vigil for freedom" by trading arms and placing "nuclear warheads and lasers in heaven... fear does the choosing between right and wrong." He blames the arrogant arms king whose heart has become a stone. Next, he sings of Raven's child attempting to wash herself clean, "her wing feathers blackened with tar... Prince Williams shoreline's an unwanted highway of asphalt and anger, an elegant scar." Denver blames the oil king for this, whose heart has been made silent by lawyers who warn him not to speak. Finally, he sings of hearts that "long to be opened and eyes that are longing to see..."

*Raven's Child is our constant companion  
Sticks like a shadow to all that is done  
Try as we may we just can't escape him  
The source of our sorrow and shame  
We are one  
The true King sits on a heavenly throne  
Never away nor above nor apart  
With wisdom and mercy and constant compassion  
He lives in the love that lives in our hearts*

### ***Via Negativa***

Many of Denver's songs also express his pain and sorrow; an experience that, in mysticism, is called the "dark night of the soul." In Creation Spirituality, this experience of letting go and letting be is what Matthew Fox calls the *Via Negativa*, the Negative Way. As full of hope as most of Denver's songs are, they're not all about sunshine and Rocky Mountain highs. It's clear he was also troubled about all we are

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<sup>9</sup> Words by Joe Henry and John Denver, music by John Denver, Cherry Mountain Music, DreamWorks Songs, 1990.

losing because of our disregard for the planet. Take the deep grief he expressed in singing, *Whose Garden Was This*:<sup>10</sup>

*Whose garden was this?  
It must have been lovely  
Did it have flowers?  
I've seen pictures of flowers  
And I'd love to have smelled one*

*Whose river was this?  
You say it ran freely  
Blue was its color  
I've seen blue in some pictures  
And I'd love to have been there...*

*Whose gray sky was this?  
Or was it a blue one?  
You say there were breezes  
I've heard records of breezes  
And you tell me you felt one*

Between these grievous stanzas, Denver bellows out the haunting chorus that at once exudes anger, sadness, and desperation.

*Tell me again I need to know  
The forest had trees, the meadows were green  
The oceans were blue, and birds really flew  
Can you swear that it's true?*

Regarding the Negative Way, Matthew Fox says, "There is no way to restore balance to the relationship of 'First' and 'Third' worlds without the First World learning to let go,"<sup>11</sup> words echoed in John Denver's 1986 song, *One World*:<sup>12</sup>

*Why are you calling this the Third World?  
I only know that it is my world  
Maybe someday it can be our world  
Can you imagine one world, one world?*

The negative path is about letting go and letting be, about not trying to control everything, about recognizing life is short and some things will have to be left

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<sup>10</sup> Words and Music by Tom Paxton, EMI U CATALOG INC., 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Fox, CS, *ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>12</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Cherry Mountain Music, DreamWorks Songs, 1986.

undone. “*I know I’m gonna hate to see it end,*” he sang, in *Poems, Prayers, and Promises*, “*the days they pass so quickly now, the nights are seldom long, time around me whispers when it’s cold.*” He admits these changes frighten him and he’s going to hate to see it end, “*Still I have to smile,*” as he dreams of all he may never do, like raising a family, or sailing away, or dancing “*across the Moon.*” Denver, in fact, was a huge supporter of NASA’s space program. In 1985 he received the NASA Medal for Public Service and had been the leading candidate to be the first civilian in space, before the agency chose teacher Kristy McCullough instead. He even wrote a song about the ill-fated Challenger space-shuttle crew called, *They Were Flying for Me*.

Perhaps his song, *Sweet Surrender*,<sup>13</sup> originally written for a Disney film about a Vietnam veteran, best expresses the *via negativa*, “*...the first part of the song,*” he once explained, “*talks about not knowing what the future holds, and yet not being in a hurry to get there. Then, the song moves to the idea of surrendering to life... Joy, really, is the surrendering to what life has to offer. So surrender—not without purpose. It’s not giving up or succumbing—it’s taking steps yourself; it’s moving forward and not sitting around waiting for something to happen. Don’t hold back because you’re afraid of something. Surrender—go for it and surrender.*”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Via Creativa***

Like all true creation mystics, John Denver was also a prophet, meaning he envisioned a better world. In Creation Spirituality, this kind of envisioning is called the *Via Creativa*, the Creative Way, referring to our ability to be co-creators in the continuing process of creation, of evolution, and of the ever-expanding Universe. Surely this is what Denver understood when he recorded Bill Danoff’s Native American tune, *Potter’s Wheel*;<sup>15</sup>

*Earth and fire and wind conspire  
With human hands, and love, and fire  
Take a little clay, put it on a wheel  
Get a little hint, how God must feel  
Give a little turn, listen to it spin  
Make in the shape you want it in*

Matthew Fox tells us that it’s during our experience on the creative path that we “make a choice of what images to trust.”<sup>16</sup> So many of Denver’s songs are about the images he came to trust and the vision he tried to pass on to the rest of us. *What One*

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<sup>13</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Walt Disney Music Company, Cherry Lane Music Publishing Company, Inc., DreamWorks Songs, 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Denver, *The Complete Lyrics*, *ibid.*, p.231.

<sup>15</sup> Words and Music by Bill Danoff, first recorded on the *Calypso* album,

<sup>16</sup> Fox, *CS*, *ibid.*, p.75.

*Man Can Do*,<sup>17</sup> for example, is a song celebrating the work of his friend, the great poet, scientist, inventor, architect, and visionary, Buckminster Fuller, who gave us a plan that, if followed, would end poverty and hunger within a single generation.

*As shaded as his eyes might be  
That's how bright his mind is  
That's how strong his love  
For you and me  
A friend to all the universe  
Grandfather of the future  
And everything that I would like to be*

*What one man can do is dream  
What one man can do is love  
What one man can do is change  
the world  
And make it new again  
Here you see what one man can do*

The words to his inspirational song, *Higher Ground*,<sup>18</sup> also call upon us to remember the inner vision that comes wrapped up inside each one of us.

*There are those who can live  
With the things they don't believe in  
They are giving up their lives  
For something that is less than it can be  
Some have longed for a home  
In a place of inspiration  
Some will fill the emptiness inside  
By giving it all to the things that they believe  
They believe*

*Maybe it's just a dream in me  
Maybe it's just my style  
Maybe it's just the freedom that I've found  
Given the possibility  
Of living up to the dream in me  
You know that I'll be reaching for higher ground*

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<sup>17</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Cherry Lane Music Publishing Company, Inc., DreamWorks Songs, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Words by Joe Henry and John Denver, music by Lee Holdridge and John Denver, Cherry Mountain, DreamWorks Songs, 1988.

As a visionary, Denver was also on a vision quest, seeking out those images he could trust. This seems to be, in part, what his song, *Looking For Space* is about. Denver credited the song to his experiences in the *est* movement. In his autobiography, *Take Me Home*, Denver said, “*Space [in the song] was a metaphor for what needed to be internalized. It wasn’t a fixed entity, but spiritual territory to be staked out and built upon... Before est came into the picture, I was already searching for expressions of myself, beyond music, but it was est that gave me confidence to follow through.*”<sup>19</sup> *Est* is an acronym for the *Erhard Seminar Training* founded by Werner Erhard back in 1971 and is also the Greek word meaning “it is.” Denver became involved with the movement in 1973 when he was 30 years old. Although *est* is too complicated to get into here, suffice it to say, it involves the sort of training meant to help people put their pasts behind them in order to exist in this moment, in this space. As Erhard wrote, “Create your future from your future not your past.”<sup>20</sup> This is the context out of which Denver wrote many of his lyrics, including these:

*And I’m looking for space  
And to find out who I am  
And I’m looking to know and understand  
It’s a sweet, sweet dream  
Sometimes I’m almost there  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle and  
Sometimes I’m deep in despair*

In his book, *The Awakened Heart*, author Gerald May tells us that the Hebrew word for salvation, *yeshuah*, connotes “space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, salvation comes, not by freeing the soul, as is so often the point of western religion, but by opening space, that is, by making room, by becoming more open-minded and open-hearted. This sounds a lot like what Denver was getting at when he said, “*I believe that for all of us, one of the purposes in life, one of the processes of life, is to find, to create, to determine, and to define our own space. It’s always there—it’s never not there, but it takes time to see it or to feel it or to be able to communicate about it. Looking for space on the road of experience, day to day experience, looking for space.*”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, Christine, *A Mountain in the Wind, An Exploration of the Spirituality of John Denver*, Findhorn Press, Canada, 2001, p.46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Schut, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p.42.

<sup>22</sup> Denver, *The Complete Lyrics*, *ibid.*, p.156.



### ***Via Positiva***

There can be no doubt that Denver found some of the space he was looking for in space itself, that is, in the spaciousness of nature, of Creation. This brings us the fourth and final path of Creation Spirituality, the *Via Positiva*, the Positive Way of awe, wonder, excitement, joy, pleasure, and gratitude for being part of the Universe and the world. Referring to what Rabbi Heschel called “Radical amazement,” Matthew Fox says, “...this experience is available to all of us on a daily basis, provided we are ready to undergo such ecstasies—be they nature, in our work, in relationship, in silence, in art, in lovemaking, even in times of suffering.”<sup>23</sup> It was his awe-inspiring experience of nature that made Denver want to “sing a song to make you feel this way,” and why even his most intimate love songs pay tribute to the beauty of nature.

*You fill up my senses  
Like a night in the forest  
Like the mountains in springtime  
Like a walk in the rain  
Like a storm in the desert  
Like a sleepy blue ocean  
You fill up my senses  
Come fill me again*

Although this path is often considered the first experience in Creation Spirituality, I end with it because it is undeniably the place Denver’s music both begins and ends. His love affair with Creation expresses itself in most his songs; and it is seeing Creation through his eyes, feeling it through his heart, and hearing it in his lyrics, that is his greatest gift and his undying legacy. In what I find to be one of his most moving and inspiring songs, *To the Wild Country*,<sup>24</sup> he sings about how he survived being lost in the struggle and strain of living in a society where “*There’s nothin’ wild as far as I can see;*”

*Then my heart turns to Alaska  
And freedom on the run  
I can hear her spirit calling me  
To the mountains, I can rest there  
To the rivers, I will be strong  
To the forests, I’ll find peace there  
To the wild country, where I belong*

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<sup>23</sup> Fox, *Wrestling...*, *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>24</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Cherry Lane Music Publishing Company, Inc., DreamWorks Songs, 1977.

Regarding one of his most beloved hits, *Rocky Mountain High*, which he wrote after witnessing the Persoid meteor shower while on a camping trip and, in his own words, “*doing other things that I’d wanted to do all my life, and in the place where I most wanted to be. Everything was new and full of possibility, and I was so happy.*”<sup>25</sup>

*He was born in the summer of his twenty-seventh year  
Comin’ home to a place he’d never been before  
He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again  
You might say he found a key for every door*

Although Denver’s lyrics mostly emphasize the environment, global justice, and his awe of nature, his, like most popular songs, are essentially love songs, yet his idea of love wasn’t limited to just one relationship; it included his relationship to everyone and everything. He loved the Earth, the stars, the sunshine on his shoulders, the wind-song, and homegrown tomatoes. He loved perfect strangers on the other side of the world, realizing, no matter who we are or where we live, we’re all responsible for each other. In his song, *It’s About Time*,<sup>26</sup> for example, Denver is almost pleading with us to remember this simple truth.

*There’s a man who is my brother, I just don’t know his name  
But I know his home and family because I know we feel the same  
And it hurts me when he’s hungry and when his children cry  
I too am a father and that little one is mine*

*It’s about time we begin it to turn the world around  
It’s about time we start to make it the dream we’ve always known  
It’s about time we start to live it, the family of man  
It’s about time, it’s about changes, and it’s about time  
It’s about peace and it’s about plenty and it’s about time  
It’s about you and me together and it’s about time*

So, like Creation mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg, who said, “The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,”<sup>27</sup> Denver often sang about the beauty and majesty of our fellow creatures.

*The silver dolphins twist and dance  
And sing to one another  
The cosmic ocean knows no bounds  
For all that live are brothers*

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<sup>25</sup> Denver, *ibid.*, p.195.

<sup>26</sup> Words by John Denver, music by Glen Hardin and John Denver, Cherry Wind Music, DreamWorks Songs, 1983.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

*The whippoorwill, the grizzly bear  
The elephants, the whale  
All children of the Universe  
All weavers of the tale<sup>28</sup>*

Dolphins, bears, eagles, hawks, horses, Denver sang about these and many other creatures he loved, lending them his voice.

*Have you gazed out on the ocean, seen the breaching of a whale?  
Have you watched the dolphins frolic in the foam?  
Have you heard the song the humpback sings five hundred miles away?  
Telling tales of ancient history, of passages and home?<sup>29</sup>*

He included his own version of a wolf's howl in his last song, *Yellowstone*,<sup>30</sup> written while shooting a film about his life with National Geographic, completed just a month before his tragic death in a plane accident. During the filming he said, "When I die, I think I'll come back as an eagle. Yeah, I'm coming back as an eagle." He finished *Yellowstone* but didn't have time to professionally record it. Although his life was cut tragically short at age 54, Denver's music lives on, as does the eternal Spirit of Creation that inspired the world's most famous country boy. He may not have been able to fulfill all his dreams—he may never have danced across the Moon—but he did fulfill his desire to give voice to the beauty he saw outside, and, through his songs, has enabled the rest of us to know what he felt inside.

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<sup>28</sup> From *Children of the Universe*, words and music by John Denver and Joe Henry, Cherry Lane Music Publishing Company, Inc., DreamWorks Songs, 1982

<sup>29</sup> From *I Want to Live*, words by John Denver, music by John Denver and Mike Taylor, Cherry Lane Music Company, Inc., DreamWorks Songs, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Words and music by John Denver, Cherry Mountain Music, 1997.