

Preface

GROWING UP THE SON OF A PREACHER IN THE WOODS AND LAKES OF northwest Michigan (where, if you hold up your Michigan-shaped left hand, your pinky touches the ring finger), nature and religion have always been prominent in the ecology of my life. But they were often separate. My religious life was for a long time a largely private affair, the personal business of inwardness. It was what I attended to on Sundays and occasionally in independent reading and prayer. My life in nature, on the other hand, was the rest of the rest. I spent much of my childhood immersed in the beauties of the Great Lakes region, often water-skiing from morning to evening on the crystal cold lakes that pockmark northern Michigan, frequently camping in its many square miles of woods, and sometimes getting lost and found while hiking and biking in the network of trails on the outskirts of my hometown. While growing up, my work life was also rooted in the natural world. I was variously employed on cherry farms, on the beaches of Lake Michigan, by an environmental newspaper, and by a land conservancy to build trails on its land preserves.

I have changed a great deal in the many years that have passed since I moved away from northern Michigan. I have experienced more of the worlds of nature and of religious life. I have traveled through and lived in many wilderness and urban places, appreciating their many beauties and also mourning their many wounds. And as a religious person, my faith has emerged into something much more public and engaged than it used to be. I remain the religious inquirer that I always have been, but I have also transitioned from being a student of theological ethics at a divinity school to a theological educator at a seminary.

In the time between my childhood and adulthood, as well as between the time when I began this book and the time that I completed it, I have worked more deliberately to bring together my love and concern for the natural world with my commitments as a religious person and theological scholar. In this more deliberate work, of which this book has

been part, I have come to recognize the degree to which all along, even and especially when I didn't recognize it, the various stages and places and natural and religious habitats of my life have always intermingled. I have come to recognize in a biographical sense what John Muir once said of the universe, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else . . ."

I am not exactly the same person I was when I was growing up in northern Michigan. Nor am I exactly the same person today that I was when I began writing this book. If I were to start over on this book today, it would likely end up being quite a bit different. Yet the different selves I have been in the different places and times of my life are all a part of who I am now and what this book has become. And so while it is not at all explicit, there is a little bit of northern Michigan beneath the surface of this book. Deep within the scholarship, between the lines, there is a little bit of northern Michigan's clear night skies and a little of its rain that comes like a veil across the lake. And within my conversations with Hans Jonas and James M. Gustafson, around which this book is organized, there is the influence of the many lives of the people I have known in northern Michigan, their hardships as farmers in bad times and their inspiring efforts to preserve the beauty of the land.

All this is to say that in the course of writing this book, from the earliest stages of research to the final phases of editing, I have learned how true to life Charles Darwin's image of the "tangled bank" is. No life is ever fully independent of other lives, and my life during the time that I have been writing this book has intersected with and been nourished by many others. I hope that you will read what I have to offer here as an expression of and an invitation to ongoing collaboration on one of the most important tasks of our time, responsibly participating as religious and theological scholars in the work of preserving the possibility and even nourishing the futures of nature and human life.

In keeping with my book's title, my community of support in the several years of writing has been very much like a tangled bank. My research would neither have had a beginning nor come to a conclusion (open as it remains), without a sustaining network of reinforcing interdependencies. Professor William Schweiker, my former doctoral advisor at the University of Chicago, has been of especially momentous help. He is a master scholar and a gifted teacher-mentor, a true Socratic midwife. His encouragement and expertise have been invaluable to me,

and I am honored now to know him and to continue to work with him as a friend and colleague.

I am also fortunate to have a mother and father who not only understand and support my scholarly vocation, but who also read multiple drafts of my chapters and provided helpful technical and substantive contributions along the way. We have spent many late evenings talking through the frustrations and epiphanies that invariably attend the writing of a book. My father especially has worked with me through nearly every detail of my work. He stands for me as a great example of religiously faithful and morally engaged intellectual life.

I would also like to thank Kincade, my young son, who was barely walking when I began this work and is now a soccer player, a baseball slugger, and on occasion, a cleaner of his bedroom. His smiles and laughter and joy for life, and his troubles and his learning, inspire my own life and remind me continually of the larger purposes of intellectual and religious life. I have learned more about the meaning and importance of responsible participation as his father than from any of the many books that line my shelves.

And lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Sara, for truly making everything better.