Believing that they were “miracles of beauty,” Vermont farmer Wilson Bentley dedicated his life to taking photographs of snowflakes. One winter, a particularly fine specimen melted before Bentley could capture it on film. Years later, he was moved to tears while describing this loss.

Theodore Roosevelt and naturalist John Muir were similarly awestruck by nature, could not bear to see it threatened, and were thus compelled to act. Their contagious enthusiasm led to the creation of 150 National Forests and to a doubling of the number of National Parks.

Kay Redfield Jamison explores the psychology of these and other personae in her latest book, Exuberance. To a packed auditorium at the Dolan DNA Learning Center this winter, Jamison celebrated the nature of exuberance while relating how the study of this emotion has experienced “benign neglect” by the majority of today’s psychologists.

According to Jamison, exuberance is an ancient emotion and an addictive, irrepressible force that inspires and delights but sometimes aggravates others, and is responsible for many acts and aspects of human greatness. Those who are exuberant are invigorated by life and seduced by nature. Inquisitive, imaginative, extroverted, and fearless, exuberant persons have a penchant for novelty, adventure, and success, Jamison explained. They are “anxious to comprehend and incapable of indifference to the world around them,” she said.

According to Jamison, who is Professor of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, research suggests that exuberant temperament is coded in one’s genes but can be encouraged or stifled by one’s environment.

Jamison also explained that exuberance “sits in an uncomfortable place” between depression and acute mania. Manic-depressive illness is frequently characterized by exuberance. However, unlike simple exuberance, manic episodes are marked by extreme heights of optimism, enthusiasm, and energy. For many who develop manic-depressive illness, an exuberant mood is just a step along the way, said Jamison.

Fortunately, for most, exuberance is not a pathological state but rather an innate and uncompromising passion for life.

Marisa Macari