

# What if nature doesn't care about us?



**CHRIS HIGHLAND**  
HIGHLAND VIEWS

**T**he other morning I stepped outside and saw something in the road. As

I walked down for a closer view, my fears were confirmed: a box turtle upside down in the roadway with a gash in the bottom of its shell.

It was closed up tight, so I carried it to our yard, placing it right-side up on a large rock. Thinking there was little chance it had survived, I went inside the house. After about 15 minutes I looked out and the rock was bare!

I cautiously stole out to see the turtle standing in the flowerbed looking dazed but apparently OK. As I reached down, it hissed at me, pulling its head back inside. I left it alone. Next thing I knew it was crossing the driveway back toward the street, so I returned it to the bushes near where I found it.

Now that I am now known in the turtle-world as Savior of the Shell-People, I took a moment to reflect on why nature can't protect all her creatures. Maybe she can't because there is no "she" to care.

When "secular saint" John Muir (1838-1914) passed through WNC in 1867 on his famous thousand-mile walk (Indiana to Florida), he seemed most impressed with the "singing" he heard in the mountains:

"All the larger streams ... are mysteriously charming and beautiful ... and in the multitude of falls and rapids the wilderness finds a voice. Such a river is

the Hiwassee, with its surface broken to a thousand sparkling gems, and its forest walls vine-draped and flowery as Eden. And how fine the song it sings!"

For Muir, all of nature was alive with creative energy, music and a kind of dirty divinity. He saw "God" everywhere, but what or who was that?

One of my favorite passages in his journals suggests, "The best synonym for God is Beauty." A perfect summary of his natural theology.

The Hiwassee runs from Georgia through North Carolina and into Tennessee. A great example of something we all know: rivers know no borders. Just like Muir's Beauty-God.

Of course, the world isn't always beautiful. There is suffering, disaster, death. But somehow we're always attracted, like John o' the mountains, to the awe-inspiring and beautiful, whether a highcountry spring or a dragonfly wing.

Look at the odd ways we try to transform nature into a person and how that personality has many human characteristics.

The "fury" of a storm. The "raging" of the sea. The "fierceness" of lightning. An "angry" tornado. Or we speak of the "gentle caress" of a "whispering" wind or a "tranquil" stream.

"Acts of God" or "Mother Nature"? We think that somehow the weather, the sculpting movements of the earth, the creativity of great forces, show intention, will, emotion — a mindful hand controlling everything.

But what if nature doesn't care? What if there is no conscious personality pulling the strings, pushing the but-



CHRIS HIGHLAND  
A storm gathers, as seen from Grandfather Mountain near the Blue Ridge Parkway.

or explain who we are in the big scary universe?

When we're "blessed by a beautiful day" and the birds are singing "like a heavenly choir" while at the same moment of the same day somewhere else on the planet people are suffering and dying in floods or droughts, birds are silent as their forests are destroyed, and no one has the time to stop to see beauty, God or much dood—what can we say?

I'm not sure it's best to say anything. But before we get too grateful for something great happening to us, thanking nature or praising God, we may just take a cue from Muir and write, reflect, quietly consider our lives, our world, without assuming we are special.

Our humility reminds us we are human ... made of humus. We can learn, with the earth as our classroom; we can choose to care and practice daily empathy and compassion from a reasonable perspective. We can do what nature writ large cannot.

Maybe when it seems the Beauty-Nature-God is thinking of us, doing something for or against us, we need to listen to the songs Muir heard in the higher places. "The wilderness finds a voice." It may be only the winds, the waterfalls and the wonders we behold — and, maybe that's enough.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.