

Following John Muir's call for finding heaven on earth



Highland Views
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Columnist

I often say that naturalist John Muir (1838-1914) was a "secular saint," not because he wasn't a believer (he was) but because he transformed the meaning of belief, faith and God.

Muir was practically a walking Bible, since his evangelistic father made his son memorize the only book he felt was worth reading. Like many of us, Muir carried verses and stories in his head throughout his life.

When Muir was "converted" to nature in the "temple" of the Sierra mountains, his beliefs were absorbed by the majestic peaks — nature and God (beauty) essentially melted into one, like one magnificent sequoia soaking in all the nutrient elements of the environment.

He begins his book on "Our National Parks" (1901) with his joy of seeing people get outdoors.

"The tendency nowadays to wander in wildernesses is delightful to see." Then, these famous lines:

"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of

timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

Later in his "prophetic" call to the wilds, he states that his beloved mountains are "rich in wildness," yet it's not necessary "to cross the continent in search of wild beauty." Discovering a closeness to nature near at hand is the best thing, since wild beauty can be found "in abundance wherever [we] chance to be."

A national park, like a heaven on earth, may be closer than we think.

Religions are born in wilderness but they rarely return. Nature, the prodigious parent, awaits the return of its prodigal sons (and daughters), those birthed and nurtured in the ancient terrestrial home.

As far as we know, Moses never returned for a hike up Sinai. Jesus never returned to the desert where he first "heard the call." Buddha never wandered back to his bodhi tree where he was "awakened." It's not recorded that Muhammad climbed up to that Arabian cave ever again.

Each went out to where the only voice was the voice of the wild, untamed things, where the wind can sound like "spirit," a wolf or owl like an angel or demon, out where solitude yearns for unseen companionship and night brings the vision of dreams.

So why doesn't the path of faith lead

most believers back to wild places? How is it that following the founders of faith has become so domesticated, contained and controlled in creeds and congregations, comfortable and clean?

Religion leaves the wilderness and seldom looks back. Leaving the Garden of Eden or Gethsemane, it seeks to tame and civilize, building imitation mountains (cathedrals) with spires pointing to some better place above, while those inside — protected from anything wild — sing, pray and dream of a heavenly city in the sky.

We can almost hear Saint Muir's animated exclamations: Look how many forests have been felled for scripture pages, for crosses and "sanctuaries," when the greatest scriptures are open to all, when the living sanctuary has no walls or doors. See how much of the sacred lands have been cleared for "holy places" when the wild spaces were always filled to overflowing with holiness.

How many clear and free-flowing streams have been neglected while "baptisms" are performed only in "holy water"? What vast resources of metal and wood have been torn from the earth for worshipping the otherworldly! What of old Mother Earth? How we desecrate her!

There's "The Word" from the prophet of nature's gospel.

In her book "Phenomenal." Leigh Ann

Henion quotes her Maasai guide Humphrey: "A lot of missionaries come into Tanzania. They start to put churches all over the areas ... The world is one village now, but still, there are people living here that only believe in the sun and the trees."

People who believe in the sun and trees, who believe in rivers, oceans and wild living things as significant as humans — they can certainly terrify the fearfully faithful whose mission is to draw all eyes to the heavens. They forget the wisdom of Thoreau: "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."

The "over-civilized" people Muir called to the wild open spaces now enjoy the parks and forests he helped create. He wrote that few of us "in these strenuous times are quite sane or free." We're like "clocks full of dust" (what an image!) and many are "no longer good for themselves."

If he's right, that we're no good for ourselves, stressed out and full of dust, then how will we take care to protect the mountains, the fountains of life, the earth, the land, the water — our home?

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