

Highland Views

“When faith steps in to block the view”

No doubt you've observed a woodpecker methodically hammering up a tree. One chilly morning, after most of the golden leaves had fallen, I watched one of our feathered neighbors picking and pecking her way up to the top of our pear tree. Then I could see her bright red crest and speckled breast hopping down the trunk (I've never quite understood how birds hop up or down a vertical tree using no wings). I saw the little hammerhead hop backward all the way down the bark of that pear. Not sure I've ever observed that.

I hop back again and again to one of the great “spiritual lessons” hammered from my life of faith that still rings true after faith. It's pretty simple, as many of these trailmarkers of truth often are. My mind flits to something I learned years ago in ministry, confirmed by saunters in the woods and climbing trees: be present; pay attention. I told you it was simple.

My wife showed me a fundraising letter she received from a retreat center. There were personal testimonies of spiritual experiences people had in that spectacular mountain setting. One story caught my attention. A local church brought a refugee family to camp. The mother felt that “God was speaking to her.” She goes on to say, “It's not about the trees, the lake, or the beautiful views. [This center] is like the open hands of God.”

It's easy to understand those feelings. I've been to that location in the California highcountry. It really is quite beautiful. Before the retreat became a busy “conference center” with big new buildings where small cabins used to stand, it really did feel like a place for silence and contemplation. Now, like so many other places of “spiritual renewal,” there is an air of activity, play and, of course, worship services. Nothing wrong with that. It's just not as inviting for someone who might be seeking quiet, reflective time in a natural setting.

“It's not about the trees or the lake.” For me, that's exactly what it's about. Each person has their own reasons for seeking “retreat”; family camp is one option that works for some. I've been a camp counselor and led some of those camps. At the time, it was great. Now, after years of “spiritual and post-spiritual” work, my sense is that I'm not alone in the desire for Nature's life-giving lessons rather than the distractions of “time with God in nature.” When those distractions become the center of attention and people begin to say things like this mother, it concerns me. The natural environment dims while the light of faith shines. It's almost as if people want to have the “closeness with God” they can find in their church back home.

This family of new Americans got me thinking. When people arrive in the United States (or any “Western” country), what religion is the first one presented to them? Is there a kind of “reverse missionary” activity going on? Rather than the old model of changing other cultures in the name of faith, we now welcome people into the new promised land where they quickly learn to see the world and view Nature in a way that may be quite foreign to them—pun intended.

Not long ago I met a man who moved to the U.S. from Africa. His name didn’t sound African to me. He explained that the name he chose reflected spiritual traditions from India. Then he told me his original, deeply meaningful African name. I realize this happens all the time. Many of our ancestors changed their names when coming here, to conform to a new land. Others were given new names to impose conformity.

It’s sad that people feel they must alter their names, identities, beliefs, cultures, to “fit in” to our society. “Our” society.

Then we alter the environment to better fit us as well. A humans-first mentality.

The hopping and hammering keeps going up and down.

In the book, “When God Isn’t Green,” Jay Wexler asks, “What happens when a group of sincere religious believers insists on engaging in a practice that harms the environment in some way”?

I once walked through a 100-acre forest that a religious organization had strewn with icons and monuments, prayer flags and plaques, to transform the woods into a “spiritual sanctuary.” John Muir would leap out of his grassy grave, crying “You’re desecrating Nature’s own sanctuary!”

Sadly, some are taught that they’re refugees merely camping in this world—they’re told to see things from a “higher,” “sacred” viewpoint, because it’s not about the trees, the lakes, the beauty or Nature at all.

Maybe we all need a true retreat.

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