

The nature of our tribe, and the tribe of Nature



Highland Views
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Columnist

In her excellent book on National Parks, "The Hour of Land," Terry Tempest Williams writes, "How do we find our way back to a world interrelated and interconnected, whose priority is to thrive and evolve?" Then she asks, "What kind of belief systems are emerging now that reinforce and contribute to a world increasingly disconnected from nature?"

Having attended four different congregations in recent days, I found myself musing on the interrelations and interconnections that we seem to be in constant search to discover and hold. We may not simply discover a "community" but we try very hard to hold onto it in any way we can.

Hearing faith leaders speak about "Our People," in a tribal sense, got me thinking about the meaning of that identity for myself. I quickly listed these ways of describing my particular, personal roots:

Birthplace. Family. Hometown. Home state. Nationality. Ethnicity. Gender. Language. Politics. Religion. Non-religion.

What would all these tell someone about me? Would you "know" me if I told you? Maybe not, but at least you would have some "grounding," some context, for the person I am.

For each root there is a story.

What if a group of people congregated to share their stories, comparing common tendrils of life from origin to personality to culture and more?



Connecting to nature at Glacier National Park, Montana. CHRIS HIGHLAND

In a local synagogue, I sang and clapped while children wove through the sanctuary carrying tiny Torah scrolls. Each child bearing the scriptures, the stories of their people, their culture, their faith. There was something quite beautiful about that, especially as congregants touched each scroll or child in a kind of mutual blessing.

As a secular person I also wonder how I could participate in that living ritual. On one level I could. No one says I can't sing along and touch a Torah. On the other hand, it was beyond my reach — figuratively and physically. I could sing, clap and smile at the young faces, but I couldn't reach the aisle.

If I could have, I'm not sure I would choose to "bless or be blessed" by the scrolls and their ancient story of one people who don't seem to be "my people," even though in some sense they are.

This, in a nutshell (or a tiny scroll), is both the upside and the downside of faith. The children are taught to hold

tight to the traditions of their tribal ancestors while literally carrying forward the message — they walk in a pluralistic world where many tribes carry diverse stories, some more exclusive than others.

Terry Tempest Williams travels to a number of National Parks, drawn to the beauty of the wild. She writes, "Nothing exists in isolation, especially not wilderness." A few lines later she offers this thought: "Wilderness is not a place of isolation but contemplation."

Some communities, particularly indigenous communities, accept the isolation of wild places since the land is home and, as Williams points out, "refuge." So we set aside these wild places not to disconnect but to find some way to reconnect, to be refugees in a refuge in order to rediscover our need to contemplate, connect and somehow communicate with nature as our greater tribal community.

In a way, I'm trying to put into words something that may be beyond words.

Like Williams, we fill pages with sentences when the Big Story may never fit on a page, or in a book or a library. We give it a shot, attempting to verbalize when verbs and nouns often blur illegible.

Williams hands out phrases like walking sticks for the unexplored trails: "The call of the wild is not what you hear but what you follow." "Wilderness is the surprise of tenderness. The relationship we think is destroyed can be restored." "In wilderness, I see my authentic reflection in the eyes of Other."

That takes reflection to understand. Maybe it makes more sense up the trail, out there, as we follow. And we have to ask, "Yes, but what or whom do we follow?"

Religion often steps onto the path and says, "Come this way; we will show the path; we will be your tribe." And perhaps we take that invitation for a day or a lifetime. We become trail-guides for others, handing out tightly bound maps for the next wanderers.

For others, like Williams, and I suppose like me, a love of wandering feels good and right. We are drawn to the mapless wilderness where children carry walking sticks of their own choosing and we walk beside them, or behind them, delighting in their wonder and that "authentic reflection" in their eyes. We also become aware of myriad eyes watching us, as an encircling tribe, out beyond a world that has forgotten.

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 chiehland.com