

Listen closely for the bells of nature's church



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Radical reformer Elizabeth Cady Stanton lived with her family in Seneca Falls, New York (site of the first national women's rights convention in 1848). Stanton was an eloquent orator alongside her colleagues Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony and others, speaking in congregations when invited. Yet there was one thing that irritated her about churches almost as much as their resistance to equality of the sexes: bells. She observed: "On Sunday we had the bells of six churches all going at the same time." Before people lived so close together in towns and before they owned clocks, church bells were useful. Now, "bells are not only useless, but they are a terrible nuisance to invalids and nervous people." Then, perhaps with a twinkle in her eye, she wrote: "If I am ever so fortunate as to be elected a member of a town council, my first efforts will be

toward the suppression of bells." Stanton never hesitated to chime in with her opinions!

Walking deep into the woods one Sunday morning, I imagined that I was entering a living temple. A poem formed in my mind with each step on the trail. By the time I paused for lunch on a boulder, by a small stream beneath the redwoods, I jotted down these simple phrases: "I hear the bells of nature's church, so, on my cap, and off to search ... I bend to grasp my walking-stick, and saunter deep to forest thick ... The wooden door swings wide to show, a stream and falls in full-singing flow; I sit to listen on a boulder pew, with a smile of knowing I'm of the chosen few." In my mind's eye, a wise owl on a low branch became my preacher: "For the owl herself had only said, what I already knew, what I'd already read; The scriptures and sermons, the choirs and prayer, are open to everyone any time there; There in the wild inspiring places, the congregants greet you with furry, feathery faces; Your fellow parishioners shuffle, scurry, slither and fly, teach like the trees, the mountains, the sky." The benediction of that poetic verse was: "If you are listening and open each day, you might hear the bells, as they gladly, out there,

call away."

The poem was an expression of something I've felt for years: Nature is its own sanctuary. It's "bells" ring out every day, calling us to be attentive to the inspiring lessons we most need to hear and practice. Do we really want to be called into a closed space, shielded from the natural world, beckoned to one faith or another? Should we have to cover our ears along with Stanton at the cacophony of bells, or might we suggest bird-calls instead? (Cardinal Catholics? Perch-byterians? Bat-ists? Episcop-Owl-ians?).

When he was in Paris in 1797, Thomas Paine wrote: "As to bells, they are a public nuisance. If one profession is to have bells, and another has the right to use the instruments of the same kind, or any other noisy instrument, some may choose to meet at the sound of cannon, another at the beat of drum, another at the sound of trumpets, and so on, until the whole becomes a scene of general confusion."

Wouldn't that be something to see ... or hear? A congregation decides to call people to prayer or worship

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