

Kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

On evening walks we often pass a pond where we've heard the baritones of bullfrogs, observed green herons in their nest and spied snapping turtles circling in a mating dance. Neighbors report a black bear taking a bath in the cool, shaded waters. On several crisp fall walks, we've been startled and amused to hear a cackling kingfisher as she whips her wings over our heads, lighting on branch after branch by the pond. A flashy show, perhaps protecting a nest, its fishing ground, or both. Asserting its dominion, its royal nature? These delightful flights reminded me of the opening line from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame." The poet catches the flashy drama of wild nature.

What is that fire, that flame, the light that flickers in the flight of birds and insects? What Hopkins saw and heard was "myself it speaks and spells, Crying: 'What I do is me: for that I came.'" But more than himself, Hopkins sees his

God – Christ, who "plays in ten thousand places."

I link these images and reflections to something my friend Rob, who lives in Washington State, wrote to me. "I do a lot of reading about people who are moved spiritually by the natural environment. I have strong attraction to these 'philosophers of nature.'" I share that attraction. I haven't asked my friend if he sees a God who "plays in ten thousand places," but I sense that he does when he writes: "As I spend more time in the natural world, I am drawn into the spirit that dwells in all things." As he lives and works on his land in the Pacific Northwest, he feels a relationship with that land and the living things who inhabit the environment with him. "My time amongst them is the most spiritual' time in my life right now."

Maybe there's something in the air and water, the rain and forests of the Northwest that absorbs a person who, in turn, absorbs it all. I certainly felt that living on an island not far from where Rob and his wife live now. After a long day cutting trails through the thick woods, I sat by the wood stove in my tiny one-room cabin, picked up my guitar, and wrote a song: "Come, Spirit of Nature, Lead me to forest and stream, And teach me to honor the ways of the

Earth." I sang of a "Companion"—"All that you give us is beautiful."

It wasn't far down the trail of my Pagan-like beliefs that I had to stop in my tracks. It came to me that I was still looking beyond, behind, beneath Nature for something, Someone else. It seemed I was more interested in "experiencing The Presence" than appreciating the presence of every living thing immediately – un-mediated. The wild life around me wasn't enough in and of itself; Nature needed a Super-nature to be real, to have meaning. Like my old clothes and tools used to build those trails, I knew I had to discard my old thinking. It wasn't overnight, but I began to embrace a secular viewpoint. That "Spirit" or "Companion" in Nature faded, dissolved and no longer carried a human face with a divine name.

We all come to forks or alternate routes on our trails of beliefs. We choose our path and explore. If our way forward is actually backward, led by ancient books or beliefs, can we say we're progressing or moving forward at all? If our path is smooth and well-traveled by the masses, do we ever stop to consider whether we've really chosen the path or was it chosen for us? And, ultimately, are we willing, courageous enough, to cut our own trail, to make our life more

about exploration and discovery than "following" others or passing on hand-me-down traditions?

Sometimes it takes a screech owl in the night, a curious new insect on the sleeve or singing a song to tune into a new wakefulness. I sang my "Spirit of Nature" song over and over as I labored through the forest thickets. Pausing to listen in the silence, to smell the fresh earth on boots and hands, I sensed a renewed wonder. I was overwhelmed by the desire to learn about this environment, this land, the only earth I can know.

I respect Rob and all those who honor a deepening relation with the world around them. Those of us who call that relationship something different, without using traditional spiritual language, can walk alongside on common trails. We can be present, though we may not look for any other Presence. We catch fire with the kingfisher and draw the flame of the dragonfly.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Learn more at chighland.com. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.