

We could have a little more faith, in nature



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

On one of our daily walks Carol expressed her sadness that a coming cold spell might harm the new spring buds and flowers. At least she's consistent when she says, season by season, "I'm worried about the new life on the trees and bushes." My usual response is to keep it light and try to elicit laughter, assuring her the natural order will take care of itself. "Yes, some things will be harmed, others will die, but don't worry, nature can take care of itself."

This particular afternoon when Carol was lamenting the weather, making a characteristic comment about the fate of the blooms, I tried another angle. With a serious tone I said: "You know, I think I figured out what your problem is." She was smiling and shaking her head already, anticipating a silly or sarcastic remark. "Yes, I think I know your problem—you don't have much faith ... (pausing) ... faith in nature." I thought that was quite clever. She muffled a moan as we kept walking.

We humans often complain about

the natural order, forgetting that nature does what nature does and we are no greater or lesser than anything else. This is how a seasoned naturalist or competent scientist would view the world. What about the faithist—the person of faith? Could their belief in the super-natural cause them to lose faith in nature?

Following the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker, Ralph Waldo Emerson sailed for Europe, spending nine months traveling, expanding his knowledge of history, exploring the world of his own thoughts. With the loss of Ellen and resignation of his pastoral position in Boston, he needed some new direction in his life. Soon after his return, Emerson was invited to give a lecture at the Boston Historical Society on "The Uses of Natural History." What he told his audience set the ground-work for his new "ministry" as a writer, philosopher, poet and, as I would say, "secular preacher."

He presents five main "uses" of natural history (another name for nature-study and science):

- it promotes a healthy, outdoor life
- it provides food and useful materials from the earth (particularly through farmers)
- it is educational and builds character

-it explains who we are and how we fit into the order of the universe

We get the sense the speaker is simply showing us what we already know but neglect to think much about. As we learn more about our world we discover how integrated we are in the whole. This makes us healthier and more aware of our dependence and interdependence on the earth for our sustenance. One important aspect of that healthful use is inspiration for poetry and thought.

Emerson recognized that nature is a living form of communication. He said: "Nature is a language and every new fact one learns is a new word." He follows that provocative thought with: "I wish to learn this language ... not that I may know a new grammar, but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue."

What a delightful way to think of the natural world. He frames it in an almost biblical manner—"the word made flesh" dwelling among us. From his background as a minister, this isn't surprising. Yet, consider how he has transformed the theological language into the natural. As biographer Robert Richardson describes it: "Emerson's thought, in this lecture and elsewhere, shows how the old argument from design would transmute itself, once it dropped its

overriding interest in proving the existence of a designer, into the modern scientific interest in how things fit together in nature." ("Emerson: The Mind on Fire")

Though Emerson believed in a Creator or Creative Energy, much like Thomas Paine, he thought the wisest way to know anything about a creator was through the creation. However, nature is not a divine word to humanity in the way scriptures are claimed to be. Nature is a language itself, and our intriguing task is to learn that language and do our best to communicate what we learn.

What does it mean to have faith in nature? This is not about worship or a "religion of nature." Emerson offers a poetic perspective: "As I walked in the wood, The silence into music broke, Sang the thrush in the dark oak, I unwilling to intrude, Slink into night solitude, Till warned by a scout of a jay, That flying courier so gay, That he sees me if I see not him, His eyes are bright if mine are dim." ("As I Walked in the Wood")

"That I may read the great book," the indoor lecturer says. The outdoor poet adds: to read you must come out, hear the music, see with brighter vision.

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