

An Ethiopian view of nature, beauty and the divine



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

My friend Thomas sent me some of his thoughts on life in his native Ethiopia. If you've been following the news, this country in East Africa has been facing political and economic turmoil with a high human cost. Thomas' insights offer an edgy perspective especially since he lives on the edge himself. With a young family, he is confronted with the difficult task of finding stable work while sustaining his appreciation for nature and holding onto his faith.

He writes: "Following the pandemic and chaos in the country, business is

now totally dead. Affording a home and other expenditures is a challenge especially to the one who observes Life from the angle of 'To be what I am.' This mentality does not let you move on every road because it is a road. It seems that we need the power of adaptability (if it works)." He packs a lot of thought into those lines. Each time I read over his words I find a deeper meaning. I know Thomas to be a thoughtful man who shares the desire of any sensitive person – to be what I am, who I am.

Thomas initially contacted me through my website. His deep love for the natural world and delight in his homeland immediately connected us. I sent him several books on naturalists John Muir and John Burroughs. Thomas speaks of the "web of creation," that "The Great Beyond" is present in the "Purely Natural." He sees Life and Death

as a natural balance. "It is what Nature preaches and teaches," he writes, "We should have this perception before interpreting [our] own outlook of Life." Thomas is describing the depth of his daily existence when he says: "It is from this ground that we can justify Life – All Lessons [come] from the revealed Truth – Nature."

After graduating from university, Thomas was developing his skills as a budding naturalist, photographing birds for presentations. He was grateful for the pair of binoculars I sent which helped him see his world a little better, as he helped me to see our world with more clarity.

My African friend quotes from "The Great Ethiopian Poet," Debebe Seifu, who expresses Thomas' own view of life: "I'm not here for something that evaporates. But [for] those eternal ele-

ments – Truth, Love, and Beauty." ("The Track of Light").

Thomas' faith integrates those elements, Nature and his experience in the Orthodox Christian tradition, which is centered in the rich and complex history of Ethiopian culture (to view something quite incredible, search for "Ethiopia's Chapel in the Sky" on YouTube). The Ethiopian Church is one of the oldest Christian denominations in the world while both Judaism and Islam have been rooted in the country for centuries (large numbers of Ethiopian Jews have relocated to Israel). The majority of citizens, almost 80%, live in rural areas where pagan and animist beliefs can still be found. I have the sense Thomas draws from those naturalistic wells.

There is a respect for science in my

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young friend's writing He thinks "the Scientist or Humankind should acknowledge the feeling of wonder and inquiry for being within him (her)" and "Science that moves against The Natural Order cannot bring a sustainable solution for Humanity for what we [face] today." He's concerned that our science does not damage "our Home – Nature." He quotes from John Burroughs: [Without] the sense of the unknown and the unknowable, life is flat and barren. Without the emotion of the beautiful, sublime, the mysterious, there is

no art, no religion, and no literature."

Thomas emphasizes the exceptional beauty and gift of his country, as well as its current struggles. He says his "Land of Liberty" led Ethiopia to become the seat of the Africa Union. It is the land of human origins, the highest and lowest points in Africa, the longest river – the Blue Nile. It is an "ancient country" with "paradoxical realities." It is the "home of more than 80 ethnic groups with their own Indigenous wisdom and way of life," yet threatened by "famine and deep rooted poverty, health crisis, social disorder, Civil War" and authoritarian government that "has made my country to crawl and being a victim of both local and international conspiracy."

As an artist, Thomas delights in beauty even in the

midst of poverty and his nation's critical problems. In his words: "the main substance in the beauty of Nature [is] called 'divinity,' ... It is this nature of beauty itself that takes us to Liberation, Healing ... and Organic Unification – Artistic." This is what makes us human.

I find it fascinating that Thomas defines humanity as an artistic blend of nature, beauty and divinity. We have much to learn from the wisdom of young Africar minds.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.