

Eco-religion and a Blue Ridge Mountain high



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

From his early work at the U.S. Forest Service to teaching game management at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was a serious student of ecology. “A study of our home.” That’s one way to define ecology (Gr: oikos: home; logos: study). As Leopold states: “That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology” and, he says: “Ecology is now teaching us to search in [nature] for analogies to our own problems” (“A Sand County Almanac”). When people ask what it means to be “secular,” this is one response, similar to what it means to be “humanist.” If we desire to learn more about ourselves and our “home planet,” we need go no further than a close investigation of living things around us, and that includes other humans, their cultures and beliefs.

Halfway through his “Almanac,” Leopold explains what we could call an ecological religion: “It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding

caravan of generations: that [humans] are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution.” The result of Charles Darwin’s explorations ought to humble us as we find ourselves equal among other earth inhabitants. “This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic [living environment] enterprise.”

In a chapter entitled “Wildlife in American Culture” Leopold presents nature as a primary teacher particularly through our instructive relationship with animals. He says the culture of so-called primitive people is often centered on wildlife. “Thus the plains Indian not only ate buffalo, but buffalo largely determined his architecture, dress, language, arts, and religion.” We may have learned this fact in school, but have we learned anything from it? Do we give much thought to how animals sustain us, how wildlife including plant life is essentially Our Life?

While listening to John Denver’s “Rocky Mountain High” album, I couldn’t get the words from his “Season Suite” out of my head: “Open up your eyes and see the brand new day, the clear blue sky and brightly shining sun; Open up your ears and hear the breezes say: ‘everything that’s cold and gray is

gone.’ Open up your hands and feel the rain come down, taste the wind and smell the flowers’ sweet perfume; Open up your mind and let the light shine in, the earth has been reborn and life goes on.” Then these contemplative questions: “Do you care what’s happening around you?; Do your senses know the changes when they come?; Can you see yourself reflected in the seasons?; Can you understand the need to carry on?” We hear the songwriter’s celebration of the senses, to open them in union with an open mind to soak it all in. The artist feels the inter-relationship that Leopold calls us back to.

As we make the outdoors our recreational playground we can end up using the natural world as we sometimes use religion—as an escape from wilderness and wildness. For Leopold, we need a new kind of “sport,” one that doesn’t destroy anything—wildlife research. Learn from the wild things and the wild itself. Those who respectfully study nature are not only a “professional priestcraft,” says Leopold, but “all grades of amateurs.” “They simply [realize] that the most fun lies in seeing and studying the unknown.”

Consider the overlooks on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Vast open scenes of living beauty meet the eye. At an overlook I ask myself, as I often do in nature: What am I looking-over? Captivated by the

expansive view, could I be overlooking nature’s less-dramatic lessons? As with many wisdom teachers, naturalists call our attention closer—that beetle, flower, tree, bird perhaps never seen before. Could this be a new teacher? If we put our distracting screen-machines down for a moment, we may discover nature is more immediate (and we are a part of it, as John Denver reminded us) with perhaps even more dramatic views and delightful lessons.

“Above all we should, in the century since Darwin, have come to know that [humanity], while now captain of the adventuring ship, is hardly the sole object of its quest” We should have learned by now we aren’t the center of things.

Writing over 70 years ago, Aldo Leopold left us an “Almanac” with an ecological view, perhaps a kind of religion, pointing toward the wide and wild open classrooms, the “Wilderness areas [that] are first of all a series of sanctuaries”

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