

Amazing, extraordinary, wonderful gifts of nature



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Sitting on a grassy hillside overlooking the Pacific ocean late one afternoon. The immense sky a mirror of bright blue. Turkey vultures swooped low overhead to see if I was fresh meat (close enough to hear the rustling of wings). A kind of meditative state, I suppose, taking it all in, knowing I could never take it “all” in. The sun appeared to be sinking in the West, sending streaming light at me—a “river of sun,” as I imagined it; flowing to me, feeling it was also flowing from me. A kind of “mystical” moment frozen in time.

Motorcycling the bumpy roads through Yellowstone National Park I cruised into Hayden Valley. Finding a crowd at one viewpoint, I pulled my iron horse over to see what the attraction was. Someone let me spy through their telescopic binoculars. There, by the clear mountain stream, a grizzly feeding on a fresh elk kill. Patiently perched nearby, a pair of eagles on a low branch. From the forest behind these magnificent creatures, a young moose came

running toward the stream hotly pursued by a coyote—or was it a wolf? The whole scene rather “magical.”

Standing there in the operating room on the top floor of the hospital, I watched closely as a mass of moving tissue was pulled from my first wife's body. I'd never seen a C-section, or any kind of surgery, but this was my child, born early on a Sunday afternoon. Almost like a dream, I welcomed her into the world, into my life, my arms. Eyes wet with joy, the scene outside drew my attention: colorful sails waving in the sunlight across San Francisco Bay on a surreal day that felt intensely “spiritual.”

Meditative; mystical; magical; spiritual. A setting orange sun, a scene teeming with wildlife, the birth of a baby girl. Marvelous moments; incredible feelings; a sense of life's goodness, of being inter-related, connected to the present, linked to everything.

Is this the origin of religion, the fountain of faith, the spring of spirituality? I think so. It makes me smile, respectfully, at the many ways we attempt to describe these indescribable encounters with Life. We can't be blamed for trying to hold an amazing moment in a nice neat box of belief.

We name the unnameable, express the ineffable, speak what cannot be spoken. We need our words to “become

flesh and dwell among us.” We stand in amazement, faced with overwhelming silence, and can't resist the urge to speak. Even with plants, animals or anything else on the planet, we have to seize it, name it, or capture it in a jar to preserve it somehow. We do the same with invisible things. Human history is marked by the endless markings of things, including stunning things we experience or feel or think and we say they are “divine” or “sacred” or “spiritual.” Completely understandable. We have a remarkable encounter with the natural world and are drawn to a sense of presence. It's we who are present, while feeling the presence of another, a human or wild thing. When we name that presence (or elevate it to Presence) and give it a face, it often looks just like us. Also understandable.

Are we fooling ourselves when we exchange relation for religion? When the fantastic becomes faith? Maybe that's simply our human propensity to raise the natural to the super-natural level, the ordinary to the extra-ordinary. Perhaps that's the real issue: what is ordinary (normal, average, common)? We may have never seen or heard or experienced a particular thing before, so it's out of the ordinary (out of order, uncommon) for us. That can be disorienting, even frightening. How do we respond?

The Roman philosopher Lucretius wrote: “This dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shifting shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature” (“On the Nature of Things”). Lucretius thought a clear-eyed, open-minded view of nature would make us healthier and happier. We can find tranquility by using one of the most amazing, extraordinary, wonderful gifts of nature: our reason. This isn't simply about getting “stuck in our heads” with every experience in life. It means as rational creatures we can make informed decisions about what we are seeing or feeling. The curiosity and wonder felt by the scientist in the field or laboratory can be as profound as the monk in the monastery garden. One calls it investigation, the other inspiration. One makes a startling discovery and calls it “delightful,” the other awakens to a new perspective and calls it “divine.”

A river of sun on the sea, a baby's birth ... the many stories we share of our incredible world.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).