

Wisdom of deserts, mountains and self-discovery



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

In his book, “The Desert Year” (1952), Joseph Krutch takes the reader through the seasons he spent in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. Living in a Southwestern environment where his wild neighbors included over 200 bird species and over 100 species of mammal, his house was surrounded by giant saguaro cactus, in the shadow of monument mountains. Krutch explains the word “desert,” meaning a deserted place, wasn’t really accurate since “it is teeming with live things” and the soil “supports life, less crowded than in wetter regions but pleasantly flourishing. Nature does not frown here. She smiles invitingly.” This positive perspective got me thinking about desert tales from the history of religion.

Joseph Krutch offers many observations we can reflect upon with freethought or faith. Early in the book he writes: “There is all the difference in the world between looking at something and living with it. In nature, one never really sees a thing for the first time until one has seen it for the fiftieth [time].” A very perceptive observation. Simply enjoying a “view” isn’t enough; to actually “see” something, to experience what that is, means seeing it over again many times. We often say: “I never really noticed that before.” It feels like truly seeing something for the first time. This may cause one of those “aha!” moments, or a major discovery, or some kind of “enlightenment.” Krutch continues describing his openness to a basic natural

lesson. “To try to find out what that [lesson] may be is the reason I have come once more to look at, to listen to, and, this time if possible, to be more intimately a part of, something whose meaning I have sensed but not understood.” I suspect this explains the origin of religions that sprout in the desert. Whether Moses or Jesus, Muhammad or other saints or sages (such as the “Desert Fathers” or “Mystic Mothers”), we wonder: what did they sense but not understand out there and why did they try to name the unnameable and explain the unexplainable?

As a native of the verdant West Coast, a child of forested lands nourished by rain and rivers, I’ve never been much interested in desert regions. I don’t particularly like heat or “empty” land. Yet I know, as Krutch reminds me, deserts are far from empty. With the eye of a New Englander, familiar with green landscapes as I am, he is drawn by curiosity into a new wilderness blooming with wonder. I wonder as well, what might have been different if those Faith Founders had their extraordinary experiences among trees, in wet places, rather than dry and “deserted” spaces. Gautama Buddha, who had his moment of enlightened wisdom in a forest rather than a desert, taught a gentler, less judgmental and less tribal message rooted and well-suited to a greener environment. Do harsher deities emerge from harsher environments? Do any divinities emerge from greener places, essentially saturating the land? For indigenous peoples, that does seem usual. More Pagan, earth-centered religions seem “greener,” embracing the virescent fecundity of place (sometimes referred to as Dark Green Religion). Yet, our major historic religions, with billions of followers, are desert-born — hard-scrabbled out of sandy, rocky, barely habitable ground. As Krutch says of the pantheist: “He

believes in many voices, many prophets, many incarnations, even; and he is grateful for them all.”

Can we be grateful for all that comes from wild spaces, whether desert, forest, plain, mountain or sea? Wild breeds wild — the unknown and untamable — so how could a well-controlled belief-system or “systematic theology” neatly package that wildness? Could a practical way of life truly come from naked Nature? How could a person become a disciple of the wild, harvesting lessons from such rough, desolate, lonely land? How many who sought an open-air, expansive vision of life and universe didn’t survive, never emerged from the stark solitude, to proclaim new wisdom? And who can say what may yet emerge from those lands, who may yet walk out with a fresh “gospel” that changes everything?

After climbing to a high mountain, far above his desert den, Krutch explains it would be easy to remain on the summit and gain wisdom, except, wisdom can’t be carried down. Yet, “there is something which can [be carried] and that something is to be found nowhere else.” I think what Joseph Krutch is telling us — the message he’s brought from his desert and mountain experience — is that we must learn for ourselves, from our own wild places. As he says: “Not to have known...either the mountain or the desert, is not to have known one’s self. Not to have known one’s self is to have known no one....”

Self-discovery is a day by day, year by year, journey.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).