

Facing the living Earth with reverence and awe



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

We shouldn't take things at face value, especially when the subject has no visible face. In ancient Israel, Moses was famous for having seen the Lord face to face, though the Hebrew God made it quite clear no one could do that and live to talk about it. In religious history, few have made the claim they saw a divine being. It may be a good thing that religion is not the only way to face the world and awaken to the part we play in the grand picture.

In an episode of "The Wild" podcast, an environmental writer named Ferris Jabr, shares his research from across

the world, even drawing lessons from "re-wilding" his own backyard in Portland, Oregon. The podcast introduces his viewpoint: "That all life on Earth is part of a giant feedback loop, a process of self-creation that has been ongoing for billions of years. This is the idea that Ferris Jabr explores in his book, 'Becoming Earth: How Our Planet Came to Life.' Jabr traveled the world to find examples of this creation: from climbing a colossal tower over the Amazon to tunneling a mile underground towards the core of the Earth. Ferris now believes that life doesn't just exist on this planet, but that the planet itself is alive."

Late in the interview, host Chris Morgan asks Ferris if he's religious. His response was intriguing to say the least: "I have always had an innate reverence and awe for nature, for the universe itself, its complexity, its diversity, its

beauty; I find a lot of joy and inspiration and wonder in learning and understanding how this big, beautiful, wonderful universe works. ... What drives me is an intense, innate curiosity about all of this ... I find that incredibly fulfilling, just to be a part of this, is more than enough. I feel privileged for that."

It almost sounds as if he's expressing a kind of religion without being religious. Or the term "religious" has been expanded to include a feeling of interrelation with everything our senses display to us. For many, the word religion simply isn't big enough, it's too restrictive. It's not always about having faith, it's about sensing the goodness, experiencing the beauty, of the world in which we are a part, and responding with curiosity, wonder and reverence. Fearlessly facing the world, to learn from it, to search out its mysteries, to gain knowl-

edge – in this process of exploration and discovery, we aren't threatened with death by a shy and shadowed deity. People certainly die in the face of nature's awesome power (and, in the end, we all die), but we aren't being punished for being curious creatures. It's completely natural to let our wonder guide us to investigate and expand our own horizon of knowledge.

Ferris thinks we mess up the home-planet through a short-sighted ignorance that blinds us to the greater picture. He states this clearly and distinctly: "We've seen throughout the history of science, that we are a very hubristic (prideful) species (so) I think we need to be humble. ... We have an outsize influence on this planet (yet) we also need to recognize our own limitations." When

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we blunder about, harming the environment, it always comes back to harm ourselves. He says, "We don't have enough knowledge to control the entire system ... so it's wiser to live more cleanly, using more renewable energy, to keep the Earth habitable and alive." Morgan and Jabr discuss how the "biodiversity crisis" impacts the whole planet, yet "the planet knows what it's doing." As ecologists, devoted to their study and kinship with all species in land, sea and sky, they see it as an inter-connected system we should learn from and live with responsibly. Caring for the environment including our "wild neighbors," can sustain our world for all of us, human and nonhuman.

They conclude with the hopeful belief that, with all the destruction we throw at it, "the planet will be fine," "the Earth's going to keep going without us." Yet they go on to present the sobering question: "Can we act fast enough to preserve a version of Earth that still has space for us and all the other creatures that are alive with us right now?" The important thing to remember is that we shouldn't be overwhelmed, we can do our part in our own ways, in our own communities, in our own yards, by small actions that can make a difference where we are.

Perhaps we can't solve the big problems of the Earth, but, religious or not, we can work together with each other, and the living natural world, to clean up and manage the only home we have.

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).